

Literature

We have spoken of the foundations, the concepts of God, of thought, and of man. Before moving on to speak of the individual disciplines, it is necessary to speak of the single discipline which is the principal vehicle of culture, the lens through which others are viewed – the discipline of the written word.

ELEMENTARY CULTURAL LITERACY

In medieval times, the requirements of elementary education, called the Trivium, had to do with three linguistic achievements – grammar, logic and rhetoric. Grammar referred to the entire mastery of syntactically clear and accurate speech and writing. Logic referred to the ability to think systematically and rationally, even to name various possible errors of thought process. Rhetoric was the culminating ability to construct an argument, clear in expression, rational in concept, and persuasive in presentation.

In the effort to build culture, clarity of thought and of expression is essential. Bad grammar is harmful primarily to the extent that it is not capable of expressing clear thought. Country grammar in itself has a certain interest, but its usual consequence, unclear syntax, prevents the expression of complex thoughts. That is why both sentence diagramming and the learning of a second language have so much value: they enable a better understanding of the actual requirements of language.

Logic is the orderly study of the smallest element of an argument — the syllogism. Being clear about what definitely implies a certain conclusion and what only seems to imply any conclusion — is a skill essential to thought, both to speaker and to listener.

Finally, being able to present thoughts in an attractive and persuasive manner is part of the skill of sharing thoughts effectively. Culture requires just such an exchange of ideas over time and space.

LITERATURE AS CULTURE

Once the Trivium is mastered, the effective use of language is divided into two disciplines, prose

and poetry. Prose has a general purpose of presentation, which serves every discipline of thought, since all thought is done with language. Poetry adds artistic and especially musical elements to language and is especially appropriate to the expression of matters of the heart. Of course some prose is very artistic, and some poetry is written for quite mundane purposes, mostly mnemonic.

There is another aspect to literature which is not, perhaps very much discussed. Before the separation of psychology into a science on its own, it was understood that one important way to discuss character, human relationships, and the nuances of personal decision, was to present, in context, characters in complex situations and then reflect on their decisions and defaults of decision. This dramatic approach readily covers all the topics of human interest, topics which are the same for everyone across history. More than any psychology textbook, literary work allows these preoccupations to be presented in all the various permutations of their complexity. Being a more flexible medium, and less directly self-revealing than psychological counseling, it is often the wisest and safest approach to psychological discussion. Viewed from this perspective, drama and fiction have important functions beyond entertainment. They have the power to shape our concept of human life, of character, of relationships, and of decision-making.

LITERATURE IN THE ANTI-CULTURE:

In the anti-culture, grammar is disdained as class-conscious, not without reason, as nothing so quickly marks the uneducated as their speech. However, the neglect of grammar leads to a deepening inability to communicate clearly and a widening of class division, and indeed of every kind of division that is fostered by misunderstanding.

Worse, in the anti-culture, logic is disdained as too rigid for free-flowing thought, and thus rivers of ambiguous words are spewed at the unsuspecting student or public, as if mere floods of words could well direct human thought.

At the end of this process, rhetoric is taught anti-culturally – public speaking – which is altogether

er hollow and driven by fashion and poll, not by thought; indeed there can be no clear expression of thought without grammar and logic.

The artistic side of literature, like the other arts, means keeping the outward semblance of literature, but with nothing of human value, nothing of lasting value. Books and stories are valued for their political spin or for their correct political views, but not for being true to the human situation or insightful about its requirements.

Anti-literature reaches its climax (its anticlimax) in advertisement, where the clever production of melodic, memorable, and startling imagery continues as in great prose and poetry, but separated from serious meaning and indifferent to – or destructive of – the soul of man.

IF YOU WANT TO LEARN TO READ, READ.

The best books in any field are often literary masterpieces. St. John's *Dark Night of the Soul* is considered the best of Spanish poetry; *Fabre's Book of Insects*, by Jean Henri Fabre, is a wonderful read. And how is one to classify Mark Twain's biography of St. Joan of Arc? As long as your student is reading good material, it doesn't have to be Homer, Dante, or Shakespeare. I always remember my great Aunt Marian saying that the great thing about being 70 was reading Dante. Some people like him in high school; but those who do not still have a future. One task of a good teacher is to help a student find something that shows him that reading is desirable.