

thematically, of greater consequence than the other pairings in the novel. Such a view would argue against Mr. Sonstroem's interpretation. But with the addition of Catherine and Edgar to their proper place in the structural scheme, we find that the two actions of the novel consist of two pairings per generation. Also observable is the fact that one pairing in each generation (Catherine-Edgar in the first and Cathy-Linton in the second) is weaker than the other. A possible conclusion—although it is not the only conceivable explanation—is that the Cathy-Hareton romance of the second generation is not only the structural parallel but also the thematic equivalent to the Catherine-Heathcliff romance of the first generation.

Such precision in structure, it seems, must have a relationship to what we make of the novel, and in this case the precision seems to support Mr. Sonstroem's point.

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Notes

¹ "Wuthering Heights and the Limits of Vision," *PMLA*, 86 (Jan. 1971), 51–62.

² *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

A reply by Professor Sonstroem will appear in the March *PMLA*.

Liberal Humanism

To the Editor:

Maynard Mack's address to the MLA, printed in the May issue of *PMLA*, leaves me with mixed-up feelings. I share the premises, most of them anyway, of his kind of liberal humanism, and I respond deeply to what he says about our calling; yet I can't help feeling that humanism in education has had its day. He must know, surely, that the study of great literature, which is at the center of the educational process as he understands it, is peripheral to what actually goes on on most campuses. His specific recommendations for various forms of "outreach"—from the university to the schools, the disadvantaged, "the general community of educated men and women," etc.—make excellent sense. The trouble is, they ought to have been made and adopted as policy by the MLA long ago. Maybe if the MLA hadn't long ago averted its gaze from the teaching of English in the schools and high schools, leaving it to the schools of education, English wouldn't be a national disaster area now.

Where I stand, in a rather typically mediocre college, not just "down the road" but out in the middle of middle America, those quotations by John Comenius, Matthew Arnold, and Harold Taylor have a certain ironic flavor. (The line by Pogo, on the other hand, which Mack puts at the top of his list, tells the plain,

unvarnished truth: "We have met the enemy and he is us.") This college, a former "normal" school, is an American answer to that wish of John Comenius "that all men should be educated fully to full humanity"; only we don't say anything about full humanity. We call the process "general education," and funnel all our students willy-nilly into the usual run of introductory courses in the humanities, social sciences, behavioral sciences, and natural sciences. These courses are hugely unpopular, for a variety of reasons, and enrollment in them would shrink to almost nothing if the students could choose freely; which is why they are not allowed to choose freely. They deduce, correctly, that these courses, along with the distribution requirements which keep them full, exist first to protect jobs and secondarily for their education. But the chief reason for the futility of these courses (aside from the fact that they are often badly taught) is that most of these students—ordinary, white, middle-class kids from ordinary, white, middle-class high schools—do not belong in a liberal arts program at all—even in the poor imitation that we provide. Maybe later when they've grown up a little. They read poorly, they have no capacity for handling abstractions, and they have no particular interest in learning things which are of no immediate use to them. But here they are in college, the answer to Comenius' prayer, and what are we going to do with them? Just keep on running them through these cattle pens and call it liberal education? You bet.

The situation is especially bad in the humanities. Here the glut of semiliterate students forces all teaching down to the same dead level. "The very special bond that the teaching of literature almost inevitably engenders between teacher and student" rarely has a chance to form. Mack is mistaken: there is nothing inevitable about that bond. The motives of teachers and students are ordinarily too far apart. Many of our students want only one thing from us, a grade; and for most, grades are certainly a primary consideration. The rules of the game as it is ordinarily played make grades a primary consideration. Our students have learned these rules well, after twelve years of schooling, and they do not like it when a teacher says in effect that he is not going to play their game. Any teacher who puts himself on the line, as Mack says, is starting a new game with a new and puzzling set of rules. I do not know whether we ever put the "whole self . . . naked and frail, with all its embarrassing inadequacies" on the line, but obviously a teacher who tries to be honest about what he knows and feels and responsible for what he knows and feels is going to be doing something of the sort. Few students are prepared for honesty and responsibility or know how to respond to teaching that possesses these qualities. Few teachers can remain honest and responsible for long. For years

and years their classes have been too large and they have had too many of them. The weight of numbers more easily stultifies teaching in the humanities than in any other area. Teachers and students alike, under these conditions, tend to become cynical manipulators of the system; and the transformation is not usually reversible. The teachers acquire tenure eventually and occupy various administrative and quasi-administrative positions. Having adapted to the system that has stunted their growth, and in a sense mastered it, they now frustrate all attempts to reform it. The majority of the students are their passive allies, for they too prefer the status quo. It is easier on everyone to keep things as they are. Real teaching means putting yourself on the line—students as well as teachers—and most people will do anything rather than that.

I think I should add that any teacher who accepts responsibility for that “very special bond” is bucking more than the “trained incapacities” (Kenneth Burke’s phrase, I think) of his students and colleagues: he is bucking the whole modern drive of his own profession (English for most of us) toward academic respectability and power as a subject matter, a department of scientific knowledge. Literature is not a subject and its study contributes nothing to the growth of scientific knowledge. The MLA has fostered illusions to the contrary throughout its existence and the sterile professionalism of which we all complain but seem helpless to counter is one result.

None of this is new, obviously. But that is the point. The conditions which make effective teaching in the humanities all but impossible are widely known and ought to be known to Maynard Mack. We all know that these conditions are not going to change very soon. The taxpayers will not pay what it would cost to change them, and they may be right: why pay huge sums for something you don’t understand? Liberal arts education is the most expensive education there is—in time and money—and the most difficult to evalu-

ate. You have to understand it if you are going to evaluate it, but its premises are not widely shared or understood outside the constituency which normally supports it: a basically urban, educated, middle-class constituency. The academic community itself is of two minds about liberal education: the social and behavioral sciences have their own ideas about those things which, as John Comenius says, “perfect human nature,” and they are not exactly compatible with ours.

Should we not, therefore, stop promising what we cannot deliver? Mack rejects the idea of a retreat from the ideals of Comenius and Arnold, but it is foolish not to retreat when one has overextended oneself. In our case it may even be dishonest. To persist in the dream of mass liberal arts education, knowing what we know, is to persist in a fraud.

I think it’s too late to rally the faithful, too late to remind us of our calling. It is a calling which few of us have a chance to practice, lost in these swollen, oafish bureaucracies which now pass for places of learning. If we are honest we will recognize that liberal education is probably finished as a major component and objective of higher education, or ought to be. That means that we will on our own undertake the “disestablishment” of literature, and stop forcing students into literature courses regardless of desire or aptitude. Such honesty will not be easy, for the disestablishment of literature will certainly mean, in the short run at least, a loss of jobs, lots of them perhaps, and jobs are a major concern of us all. Thus we have our own version of the tragic choice or conflict which Mack discerns in contemporary American experience: we can’t keep the faith, as Mack puts it, and go on pretending that mass liberal education is the real thing, but to relinquish that fiction is to relinquish jobs. So, faith or work? You can’t have it both ways.

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