

Literature and Language in the Academy

To the Editor:

In responding to Louis Kampf's presidential address (*PMLA*, 87, May 1972, 377–83), I would like to focus on his concept of the function of literature, then comment more briefly on his ideas as to the milieu in which it can most profitably be studied. His concept of the function of literature, briefly, is that it has redemptive powers. So strong is his conviction on this point that he assumes that all who have entered the profession have shared it. One wishes that this were so, for he is genuinely eloquent as he discusses the aspirations that led him to become a teacher of literature. "Against a world devoid of beauty, torn apart by irrationality, tragically flawed by human limitations, stood the life of the literary critic-teacher-scholar—a life devoted to civilized reflection, to bringing light where there had been ignorance." He felt confident, he continues, "that performing my task as a literary man would improve my own life, that of my students, and humanity in general." And a bit later he adds: "At some level anyone who comes into our profession believes in the redemptive power of literature, its capacity to ennoble a fallen world." Such sentiments are lovely. They are also just a little ridiculous, and they are by no means universally shared. Phrases like "at some level" are elastic enough that they could be stretched to include everyone if one wished to, but they would have become meaningless in the process. I would say that my dream in entering the profession was to bring a *little* light where there had been *much* ignorance. In the addition of those two words lies a world of difference. The sense of Professor Kampf's passage, which is clear enough, bespeaks a kind of millennial optimism very much in the American tradition, and yet for all that profoundly alien to large numbers of us.

He admits that there may be no truth in his assertions, but instead of examining them further he passes immediately to a consideration of *how* literature can affect acts that we are by no means agreed that it can. For reasons both philosophical and practical, many of us feel quite simply that literature with or without the mediation of institutions is unlikely to lead people to perfection. Our feeling in this regard does not preclude a sense of possibilities for progress, but that sense differs markedly from Professor Kampf's. The results of holding to his kind of optimism are, I think, disastrous. Such optimism generates an absolute inability to tolerate any kind of disparity between the

world as it is and the world as one conceives that it should be and culminates in the irresponsible kind of dichotomizing upon which his essay closes. There, he admonishes us that history "has aligned the forces. . . . It is up to us to choose which side we are on." Clearly he envisages on one side the clear-eyed, clean-living radical activists; on the other, the cynical careerists and suckers for humanist rhetoric. Alas, that that imminent Armageddon might, unlike all the Armageddons of the past, once and for all separate the sheep from the goats and institute the reign of righteousness on earth. It would not, and in encouraging us to prepare for it, Professor Kampf also encourages us to slash away at those tenuous and subtle threads out of which the fabric of a genuinely if only slightly better future might be woven.

To the weaving of that future, literature can make a modest yet respectable contribution. Literature does present the student with options that he might otherwise have been unaware of. It provides him, that is, with alternative ways of organizing his responses to himself and to life. Unfortunately, no guarantee exists that, being faced with these options, the student will make the "right" choice, whatever that may be. This is a bitter pill for the lover of literature to swallow. In an earlier essay, Professor Kampf asks (rhetorically I believe) "how can the man who loves *Moby Dick* be a capitalist hyena?" At the simplest level, one may respond that he can do so because it is possible for one to have an admirable intellectual understanding of moral issues without any concomitant sense of personal involvement or commitment whatever. At more complex levels, a person may legitimately feel himself to be profoundly affected by a work of art without that effect ever manifesting itself in any overt way at all. The problem is a difficult one, and one not to be solved simply by referring it to the eviscerated way that literature is supposedly taught or the alienation that intellectuals, like the rest of the proletariat, are supposed to feel. Most of us can think of colleagues who were not just technicians, not just philologists, but rather persons with a very subtle understanding of the moral issues involved in the literature they taught and, yes, even possessed of a grasp of that literature's relation to socioeconomic forces and who for all that made glorious hashes out of their lives.

Literature has a second contribution to make. It seems so obvious that one hesitates even to say it, but perhaps the time has come to say the obvious. The beauty of great literature contributes to the happiness

of some people in that it is relaxing, refreshing, therapeutic. The reasons why this is true lie deeply imbedded in very simple facts about man as an animal. His pleasure in the most sophisticated literature bears unmistakable affinities with the game instinct that one finds in children and in primitive peoples. Rhythm, repetition of sound, color, mimesis—all of these awaken deep, meaningful, primitive responses in human beings, and none of them has any demonstrable relationship to the moral improvement of individuals or the betterment of society. That this should be true is, I suspect, very nettling to committed activists like Professor Kampf. To them, the creation and appreciation of beauty for its own sake must seem not only irrelevant to the crucial concerns of today, but downright impertinent: in a world where children are being napalmed, how dare there be roses, and how dare, particularly, there be colleagues who keep insisting that, napalmed children or no, roses are important—as roses and not as ancillae to socioeconomic dogmas that may or may not make the world a better place in which to live?

Justifications for the study of literature such as these are admittedly intangible, not apt to win friends with or influence deans or regents, to say nothing of the state legislators upon whom large numbers of us depend for our bread, but what alternative justifications can honestly be made? The attempt to judge literature by nonesthetic criteria and make it serve ideological ends is by no means new, and it has never worked out very well. During the Renaissance, for example, it was fashionable to insist that literature should be judged by how Christian it was. The age's greatest scholar, Erasmus, was quite explicit that one should "measure everything by the Christian standard." That literature which strengthened one's Christian commitment was good, and that which did not was bad. Such a standard of judgment did not, except among a few extremists, absolutely preclude the reading of non-Christian authors, but it did lead logically to the conviction that the literature that most obviously and directly embodied Christian themes and values was ipso facto the greatest literature. Large amounts of poetry and drama were written in accordance with that conviction and adjudged great by the most perceptive critics of the time. Today, those judgments seem quaint; the literature itself is by and large forgotten, and rightly so. A few great works like *Paradise Lost* probably derived some strength from the tradition of Christian writing, but that tradition and the modes of judgment implicit in it have contributed but little to the survival of those works as living literature. Attempts to judge literature in terms of its contribution to the struggles for black or women's liberation are apt to fare just as poorly in the long run.

In short, my ideas as to what literature can do differ sharply from Professor Kampf's. But what if he is right, and I am wrong? In what milieu can literature, however one defines its value, most effectively be studied? Professor Kampf argues that since American universities are partisan institutions anyway and since they teach a point of view with which he disagrees (in itself a debatable proposition), the solution is to seize control of them. Then, though presumably they will still be partisan, it will no longer matter because they will be partisan on the right side. This I find absurd. I would agree that complete objectivity is a myth, but I would submit that it is an ennobling one. As one looks at the American scene today, it does not seem deficient in the qualities of passion, commitment, and activism that Professor Kampf admires. What we need, I suggest, is not more action, but action more considered, and that means a willingness to attempt at least to get outside ourselves and view ourselves in the very largest possible context of human history. American universities, I believe, have fostered such attempts better than Professor Kampf is willing to admit. They have done so partly through exercises in scholarship that he doubtless considers arid pedantry, but they have also done it in ways that he ought to approve. At the rather dowdy midwestern university where I teach, we have made large efforts in our courses, particularly the freshman ones, to deal sympathetically and responsibly with issues of black liberation, women's lib, the war in Vietnam, our capitalist system. Teachers are only human, and although I have never observed that my colleagues were particularly devoted to capitalism, the majority of them like myself are middle class in their background so that our efforts probably have been fragmentary and in some respects unsatisfactory; but they have been honest and sustained ones. For that, I think we deserve more credit than Professor Kampf seems disposed to give.

My last point is this: we do not have to observe the battle lines that Professor Kampf would enforce upon us. If we are to draw our own battle lines, however, we have to be very clear as to what our ideals are. Mine is the university wherein teachers and students pursue the truth in a completely objective and disinterested way. There, Marxist moralists and formalist critics compete vigorously with each other armed only in the strength of their ideas and ideals. That university exists of course only within the minds of men, but for all that and for all the fact that it sounds a little corny and old-fashioned, it nevertheless represents one of the highest ideals to which mankind in its long, sorry history has yet aspired.

If we strive to make the very imperfect institutions within which we work like that ideal, we are apt to offend state legislators, on the one hand, and radical

activists, on the other. To the former, we would vigorously defend the rights of the professor who wishes to teach his students Marxism in a forceful, yet responsible way; to the latter, we would vigorously deny that such rights carry with them the right to disrupt universities by violence or to encourage their students to do the same. We run the risk, thus, of offending quite a few people, first and last, but I am convinced that we are a large enough percentage of the profession that we can make our point of view felt—if we care to.

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Mr. Kampf replies:

Since E. R. Gregory chooses to attack a speech I never made, I would just as soon forgo the schoolmasterish business of correcting his misreadings, and ask readers to look at my text (*PMLA*, May 1972). However, such a gathering as his of the clichés ordinarily used to puff up our profession does not come along every day; it might, therefore, be useful to argue a few points.

I discover from reading Mr. Gregory that my “concept of the function of literature, briefly, is that it has redemptive powers.” I had thought, perhaps naively, that I was making the *opposite* point, mocking both such grandiose assumptions and Arnold’s more modest definition of criticism as the search for perfection. I did say, as Mr. Gregory points out, that some aspect of such a belief has brought nearly all of us into the profession.¹ Mr. Gregory is not happy with this, and since I can’t afford to hire the Gallup organization to conduct a poll, I’m happy to accept his version of the humanist faith: “I would say,” he writes, “that my dream in entering the profession was to bring a *little* light where there had been *much* ignorance [his emphases].” And: “The beauty of great literature contributes to the happiness of some people in that it is relaxing, refreshing, therapeutic.” I think that’s a fair representation of the substance of academic humanism and of the arguments ordinarily used to justify literature’s place in the curriculum. A good many of Mr. Gregory’s fellow teachers might, however, find his modest claims and his version of literature as Alka Seltzer somewhat offensive. They needn’t, for we are assured that our relaxing, refreshing, therapeutic “pleasure in the most sophisticated literature bears unmistakable affinities with the game instinct that one finds in children and in primitive peoples.” Who could be offended by such an appeal to the instinctual sources of pleasure? Who but an unliterary ideologue might resent the racism of such an esthetic? Those primitive folks sure do know how to play; and with such childlike simplicity.

Were I a student, I might, however, feel resentful

about the supercilious assumption that the teacher of literature brings light (little) where there had been ignorance (much) by giving me a little refreshment. Mr. Gregory makes no attempt to *illustrate* just how the veil of ignorance is to be lifted by the study of literature; indeed, he simply asserts it, as do most of those in the profession. Given the canons of literary study articulated by Mr. Gregory—and I take them to be representative of the profession’s pedagogical practice—I expect that students would emerge from their academic tangles with literature more mystified than ever. Imagine an unsuspecting student (ignorant, of course) coming to English class and having his or her ordinary sense of moral concern violated by the following: “It is possible for one to have an admirable intellectual understanding of moral issues without any concomitant sense of personal involvement or commitment whatever.” It is possible. But it is hardly a virtue (see Swift’s *Modest Proposal* on the matter). Such a dictum, separating the analysis of ethics from moral practice, asks students to split their lives. This is a game one can play in the classroom, if one has the patience; some academics might even find it refreshing; but what it has to do with the reality of any student’s moral life, I find mysterious. Of course, making an academic exercise of ethics or literary study allows us to make the most exquisite moral distinctions while ignoring the significance of our acts; it even allows us to teach a version of Marxism Gregory would like to see in his pluralistic university—one which ignores Marxism’s central principle of the unity of theory and practice.

How such a separation of moral analysis from moral commitment can distort one’s perception of literary history beyond the capacities of parody to mock is shown in Mr. Gregory’s claim that Christianity was a burden, an extraneous weight, for the literature of the Renaissance. “Large amounts of poetry and drama were written in accordance with that [Christian] conviction and adjudged great by the most perceptive critics of the time. Today, those judgments seem quaint; the literature itself is by and large forgotten, and rightly so. A few great works like *Paradise Lost* probably derived some strength from the tradition of Christian writing, but that tradition and the modes of judgment implicit in it have contributed but little to the survival of those works as living literature.” I’m glad to hear that *Paradise Lost* derived at least “some” of its strength from Christianity. Imagine how great the *Pentateuch* might have been and how much longer it might have survived if it weren’t for Judaism. Pity poor Samuel Johnson for taking his moral principles and Christianity seriously enough to have them becloud his literary judgment.

Our own literary judgments will, of course, not seem