

HUMANIST LITERATURE IN PERSPECTIVE

by *Arthur Dobrin*

I have often asked myself in astonishment
whence they could obtain this or that secret
knowledge which I acquired by arduous ex-
amination of the subject, and I finally came
to envy the poet whom I [already] admired.

-*Sigmund Freud*

"Humanist literature" is an ambiguous term. Does it refer to that which has been written by Humanists about Humanism; does it include proto-humanist work; what, after all, do we mean by Humanist; and, what is literature? My focus here is to consider as the operative term the word literature. In this way, my concern is with Humanism not in its sectarian and philosophical form as much as Humanism as it is understood as related to the humanities. I take literature to mean the production of writing, especially that of imaginative verse and prose. It is my contention that without fiction and poetry i.e. imaginative literature, a Humanist is only half-literate.

I suppose the reason why I had been asked to prepare these remarks is because I am a writer of imaginative literature. While professionally I define myself as a Humanist minister, subsumed under that definition is that of a writer. Since childhood I wanted to be a writer. My brother bought me a typewriter for my 13th birthday and it is on the same green metal machine that I do my creative writing. Upon graduating from college, the last career on my list of my 1,000 favorite jobs was clergy.

As a college student I majored in history with a minor in literature. History and fiction seemed to me to be two ways of telling a story, two ways of understanding the human condition. History was the form of knowledge, while literature was the form of wisdom. Today history has been captured by cliometricians who interpret events as statistical data rather than as human expression, so I suppose that if I were an undergraduate today I would find myself exclusively within the English Department.

Before graduating from college I had completed two novels (unpublished and now lost), but when I began my work with the Ethical Movement, I found that I hadn't the inclination to write another. The period from inception to completion was too long. As a way of finding release for my creative urges, I began to write poetry, three years after my entry into professional leadership.

My writing wasn't secret and neither was it sectarian. I wasn't writing for liturgical purposes, but I did consider it to be a legitimate part of my professional role. Of course, not everyone saw it that way and many still see it as a divergence, like playing cards or exercising-good things to do if you like it, but not religious leadership. Soon after my first book of poetry was published, a former member of the society, now living out-of-state, wrote a letter to one of the members expressing her delight that a poet headed the society. She also expressed doubt that I would stay very long. Members, she thought,

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wouldn't tolerate a poet as leader. What they wanted, she thought, was a philosopher or social activist. Her prediction regarding my longevity at the society has proven wrong, but her assessment about the lack of understanding regarding the relationship between Humanism and the humanities was probably correct. It struck me as strange then and it still does today that a Humanist leader committed to the humanities is viewed as an anomaly.

I have taken on the task of being a missionary for literature. I want to bring literature into the lives of people. I believe that writing is important for personal development, for its expressive possibilities, its insights and encouragement. Based upon my observation, it seems to me that Humanists read mostly works in the social sciences, science, philosophy, politics, biography and current events. Missing from the list is fiction and poetry—at least good, serious contemporary poetry, novels and short stories. People will spend \$5 to see a movie, \$30 to see a play and \$10 on a record and hundreds of dollars on a stereo system, but rarely spend more than a few dollars on a single book of poetry or fiction throughout the year. Members of Humanist organizations are not far from the public at-large in this respect. Typically, the book which wins the Pulitzer Prize for poetry sells fewer than 1,000 copies. Most major publishers have discontinued publishing poetry altogether and now will publish novels only from authors who have a proven commercial record, or if the publisher thinks that book will become a blockbuster with possible movie rights. The cost of publishing a book, combined with the diminishing buying public, has led to the present sad state of affairs.

With this in mind, I conduct a bi-monthly book discussion using a contemporary work of fiction, hold poetry readings, give addresses on aesthetics, teach a weekly literature class at a senior citizen center, lecture in the community about the creative process, and lead poetry workshops.

One reason why people don't read serious literature is that they see it as a waste of time. If there is time to spare, it will be used for relaxation or for entertainment. Spy novels, adventures and romances are high on the list for these purposes. But if you want to really learn something, then poetry and fiction interfere with 'productive time.'

Literature, I believe, teaches us what nothing else can. Stalin, in what must have been one of his ironic moods, said that a million deaths is a statistic while one death is a tragedy. This neatly sums one of the values of novels. It makes us feel what it means to be human, what one person experiences, what one person feels. It is for this reason that writers are so tightly controlled in totalitarian states. Authority recognizes the subversive nature of fiction. It is no wonder that many of the Soviet Union's greatest writers were sent into exile.

William Carlos Williams wrote, "-through metaphor to reconcile/ the people and the stones./ Compose. (No ideas/ but in things) Invent!/ Saffrage is my flower that splits/ the rocks." Splitting, putting together, dissolving calculi. Not abstractions but the very substance, the thing itself, the uniqueness of each thing. Not statistics that describe generalities, but nothing in particular, disembodied and bloodless numbers that allow planning and manipulation. One person is born and dies, but a number only accumulates a plus and minus sign.

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The uniqueness expressed in literature arises from its concern with feeling. Not that art is an expression of feeling, but, as Suzanne Langer noted, art is the portrayal of the nature of feeling. The artist expresses "what he knows about human feelings and that knowledge may exceed his entire personal experience." When art is the expression of feeling, it is self-indulgent; when it is less than the portrayal of the nature of feeling, it is superficial and irrelevant. Langer's approach questioned two esthetic assumptions, namely, that language is the only means of articulating thought, and that everything not speakable thought is feeling. She argues that not everything fits the grammatical scheme of expression. Novels and poetry, then, through the use of the language of metaphors, may be articulating something other than merely the expression of feeling. Something significant can be said in a manner other than expository language.

Poet Donald Hall pointed out recently that we now favor abstract language to the concrete, and the literal over the figurative. "Distrust of colorful language," he wrote, "has thrived among philosophers." Hobbes feared words used as metaphors because they are used to deceive people. Locke believed that, "figures of speech are used to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions and thereby mislead the judgement." More recently George Orwell proposed speaking plainly as a way of resisting propaganda. Orwell's fear was valid, but by "resisting propaganda, we destroy poetry," writes Hall. "Thinking adults must recover metaphorical abilities in order to intuit, in order to make connections that reason may not generate." It is those connections realized through the portrayal of the nature of feeling that generates insights that reason overlooks. This is what Freud admired in his letter to Arthur Schnitzler quoted above.

I am referring to good literature, not the popular pulp that Edna O'Brien fears causes brain damage. Formula works can only produce formula responses-comforting like sucking on the thumb, mind rotting because infantilizing. Good literature is that which is authentic, a word from the Greek meaning "one who does anything with his own hand." An authentic work is made, not received. It is worked by the hands of an individual and fashioned out of himself within the limitations of the material. This interaction between the artist and the material is what is called the creative process. Authentic art is made, crafted, built and hewn, reflecting the hand of the artist, revealing care, judgement, skill and time. As John Cheever writes, "The artist who works in words and anecdotes, images and facts, wants to share with us nothing less than his digested life, his life as he savors it, in the memories and fantasies most precious, however obscurely, to him. . .By authentic I mean actual and concrete. For the creative imagination, in my sense of it, is wholly parasitic upon the real world, what used to be called Creation. Creative excitement, and a sense of useful work, have invariably and only come to me when I felt I was transferring, with lively accuracy, some piece of experienced reality the printed page." The work is authentic and because of that valuable, the value lying in its revelation of a life lived and experienced. It is concrete and expressed through images and anecdotes, through narrative.

In referring to poetry, Jonthan Holden notes that poetic truth is concern-

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ed with value, not ontology or epistemology. The instrument of the poem is human experience noted in language. The truth embedded in the poem is revealed by the connections provided to the reader through metaphors. No thing is explained in terms of another. That which cannot be explained logically can be comprehended metaphorically. In this vein, Robert Frost commented that science measures height but it cannot measure worth. Similarly, poet Wendell Berry relates the time that he and former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz debated farm policy issues. Berry said the two of them could "never meet because he's arguing from quantities and I'm arguing from values." There again is the difference between statistics and literature, one speaking in terms of abstractions and probabilities, the other in terms of the experiences of specific people. Good literature doesn't generalize, is not sententious and doesn't wave fingers. It is always the moralist, but it doesn't moralize.

In this way, Carlos Fuentes was right in pointing to the revolutionary nature of literature. It is political in a deep sense. "Literature not only sustains historical experience and continues a tradition. It also-through moral risk and formal experimentation and verbal humor-transforms the conservative horizon of the readers and helps liberate us all from the determinism of prejudice, doctrinal rigidity and barren repetition," he wrote. Through fiction we realize a deep factualness. Fiction is not the opposite of truth but its ally, its guardian against the established order with its own agenda of subordination. As Fuentes wrote, "The novel and poem by their very nature are anti-totalitarian and therefore subversive and liberating.

Recently Dave Smith honored America's only writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for both fiction and poetry, Robert Penn Warren. About that author, Smith said his art "celebrates continuity, tradition that civilizes, insists on the radiant wildness of each human heart."

This, then, is why I believe a religious Humanist cannot do without literature: it reflects the dignity and possibilities of being human. Reading poetry and fiction is hardly a waste of time, an entertainment or diversion from the real stuff of this world. Nothing is more real than the dignity and possibilities of each person. It is the heart of religious Humanism-wildness and all.