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## SOCIAL CONTENT OF LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

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It is possible that a discussion of this subject might find itself turning unproductively on the word “content”. The term “social content” suggests that a work of art (I include literature) may contain an element that can be identified as “social” and studied apart from the work as a whole. Indeed, in some cases it may be possible to do so, but such a separation is not generally characteristic of creative work. A discussion of the subject will state more truth with greater clarity if it considers the function of the work of art within the whole society. The consideration of “social content” suggests the static characteristics of a document, which art is not. A description of “function”, on the other hand, suggests dynamism which is the very essence of creativity.

From this point on, I will refer only to literature because I will be on surer ground and because I can avoid the complication of referring to the difference between literature and the other arts. We must recognize of course that literature is distinguished by the use of words. Words, in our culture, are inevitably associated with ideas, ideas with reason, and reason with reality. This whole series of associations is an enormous fabrication supported by wishful thinking rather than by truth. But so long as we insist on keeping faith with this fiction, literature will often be expected to do something its creators do not usually intend —simply because it uses words.

In order to appreciate the relationship of literature and society, we must work with two reciprocating views. Society includes literature just as it includes all other things that men do. And literature generally reveals its kinship with the total circumstances. At the same time, literature includes society because it often deals with social attitudes, aspirations, even events. The crucial fact is that the literary work is not a doctrine or a document but an experience like watching a sunset, falling in love, driving a car, robbing a bank, making soup, climbing a mountain. The essence of the experience is the act of climbing, not the fact of the accomplishment.

Since novels and plays tell stories, they are more vulnerable than poetry to misuse as documents. Poetry is misused as philosophy. The relationship of novels and plays to daily living suggests that they may be valuable as sociology or as history. And indeed they may be so, but preferably if the sociologist or historian understands the literary function. It would be absurd to use *Romeo and Juliet* as a source of information about marriage customs in Verona. But many works that are

not protected by the status of being masterpieces are often expected to produce information of this kind.

We must be clear that society as seen in literature does not lend itself to quantitative studies. We may find a very limited semi-documentary value if we identify the action of a novel with experience past. But such use is a serious distortion of the work, because literature is experience present. Reading a literary work is a unique experience. It is made so by the fact that it is a creation.

I do not mean that literature does not contribute to our knowledge of society. Quite to the contrary, it offers a kind of information that is essential to understanding and which cannot be gotten anywhere else. Here we run into a problem created by the arbitrary limits we place on the ways of knowing. We tend to admit only what can be authenticated by critical examination and reference to past experience. Much more can be learned by surrendering to the function of art.

As an example, we may consider a novel now about a year old, *Los juegos verdaderos*, by Fernando de los Rios, a Peruvian. I choose this work because it is neither Mexican or Northamerican, it is too recent to have acquired any particular status in literature, it has received generally favorable reviews with some reservations, and it has an obvious base in a recognized social problem.

The book brings into focus three sets of circumstances: 1) a guerrillero in a prison in the Peruvian jungle, 2) a young man about to leave Peru ostensibly to study in Mexico but really to go to Cuba for guerrilla training, and 3) a young boy among his childhood friends. The novelist allows us to assume that the protagonist is the same in all three circumstances. But he does not tell us that is the case. Our attitude, therefore, is different from our attitude toward a hero-protagonist whose character is logically developed throughout a novel. We do not feel we are dealing with a single person. Still the communication of emotion in each of the three circumstances is so intimate that we feel more involved than we would with an abstraction or a mass protagonist. What we have then is a kind of intimate generalization of a guerrillero.

What do we learn about society? Certainly not how many guerrilleros there are in Peru, nor anything about the probability of their success. We do experience the revolutionary impulse as we never could on the basis of document or statistics. I am not able to communicate it here. I cannot say the impulse; I can only talk about it. The knowledge is the experience. And the experience, in turn, has two facets. One is the reader's vicarious reaction to the three circumstances; the other is his awareness of the novelist's creative act in making the circumstances. This second awareness is what makes the novel different from a newspaper account. It is also what makes the work a unique experience—a creation cannot be created more than once.

Most of us have been indoctrinated in fiction and theatre that is

based on observed reality. We forget that this basis has served authors for a relatively short time. Novels of chivalry, pastoral novels, even sentimental novels came from the imagination rather than from observation. Even the picaresque novel takes a restricted and somewhat stylized view of society. Only Realism and Naturalism attempted a reproduction of social actuality. They have been misused more than purely imaginative works because it is easier to read possible documentary value into their apparent verisimilitude. But if awareness of creation-in-progress is lost, even in a Realist novel the work is only partially understood. What is even more important to an understanding of the relationship of literature and society is the fact that novels based on observed reality have been disappearing for quite a while, and purely imaginative fiction has been gradually taking its place. This change may very well be corollary to a change in the social structure. The possibility is much too complicated to be dealt with at this point. But we should understand clearly that these novels are not reconstructions of social reality in the usual sense. They bear little or no resemblance to that restricted view supported by the association of word to idea to reason to reality. Indeed, these novels may be utterly unreal from this limited viewpoint, but they are no less experience. They are experience just as poetry is, without reproduction of the social scene.

Because of the factor of experience, literature is essential to the process of education. Education is concentrated experience or it is nothing. This description applies even to highly specialized, technical education. It is even more applicable to what we call "liberal education"—that is, the development of the individual's capacity for exercising all his human functions. Ideally, the concentration of experience through education should give every generation an advantage over the preceding.

Although we have approached this ideal, it has never been achieved, for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is that we tend to understand experience as past rather than as present. When we speak of "experience", we really mean "experienced". Our appreciation of experience allows it to be passive. It becomes a tool or a criterion which we use but which has lost its own vitality.

The use of the literary experience in this way does increase to some extent the reader's capacity to exercise his human capabilities. To say it in a more commonplace way, he gains some knowledge of what life is like. But the potential of literature is very limited unless a work is treated as actual experience. Experience that is not observed from a distant point, but acknowledged in the act itself. This experience is not simply identification with the characters or theme of a literary work. It is this identification plus an awareness of the author's creative act, a sense of witnessing a coming-into-being. (The most important job

of literary criticism is to reveal and analyze the various aspects of a work in such a way that the reader may realize more fully both the identification and the creative movement.) The reader himself becomes a third factor in the experience.

This sense of becoming, of the process of creation, is the major social content of literature. One of the paradoxes of our attempts to understand our circumstance is that we insist on using static means of appreciating dynamic reality. Society is always dynamic, though the intensity of movement varies. Dynamic reality is always present in literature.

We must also recognize the possibility that what visual observation calls "society" may not be reality at all. To put it another way, the whole structure may be antagonistic to what is authentically human. Recent novels, in their movement away from reproduction of visible realities, create worlds that seem more real than reality, fictions that seem truer than truth. These apparent paradoxes can be understood only if readers enter the creative process.

If many should do so, it is possible —just barely— that the creative imagination of men might come into the mainstream of life and produce an exercise of the human capability which, up to now, has existed only in the wildest dreams of a few. It is lamentably probable that the creative imagination will continue to be relegated to a peripheral importance, from which position it goads us, frustrates us, keeps us alive but never authentic. In terms of what literature may do, I fear that the recent novels I have referred to may reach only a very small audience, while the great majority watch television, which is considered more down-to-earth. In other words, these novels may join poetry in relative oblivion.

Let me say clearly that I do not wish to plead the case of a few novels. I use them only as a symbol. The point is that we have a chance to discover reality. This reality is the awareness of creation, of dynamic life that Jorge Guillen's reader experiences when the poet says

Soy, más, estoy. Respiro.  
Lo profundo es el aire.  
La realidad me inventa,  
Soy su leyenda. ¡Salve!

I am; I am here and now.  
I breathe the deepest air.  
Reality invents me.  
I am its legend. Hail! \*

\* The verse is from *Cantico* and is cited here from *Affirmation: A Bilingual Anthology, 1919-1966*, with translations by Julian Palley (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), pp. 30-31.