Teaching Literature in the Space Age

ARLIN TURNER, Duke University

It is a genuine pleasure for me to be invited here to speak this evening. For one thing, the Conference on English Education is a thriving young organization which has an important role to fill in the years before us, and it has set about its task with convincing earnestness. I wish for the Conference all the achievement promised by its beginnings.

I am pleased to be here also because of the occasion I thus have to tell you something about the Commission on Literature. Beyond that, I want to pass along to you some thoughts I have on the teaching of literature in our age, which is already recorded as the space age in man’s long history. The name fits well into the sequence: the stone age, the bronze age, and the others. I wonder, though, whether we are not unique in this regard, in that we have been consciously present at the birth and the christening of our age.

There is no need to speak in apocalyptic tones, but it is not surprising, I’d say, that people nowadays are inspecting the anchors of their thought, to determine which ones of them still hold, now that we are all residents in the world of science fiction, in which man finds that he can travel beyond the gravitational reach of the earth—and can survive there. Let me add that in presenting my thoughts in this area, on the space age, I’ll be speaking for myself rather than the Commission on Literature, though the general slant and import of my remarks would not be new or strange to members of the Commission.

Many of you, most of you perhaps, are aware that the Commission on Literature has been in existence roughly two years now, and that it has made a deliberate and unshowy but significant beginning in the activities intended for it.

The idea of a Commission on Literature was first advanced by James E. Miller in an editorial in College English. He noted that the National Council of Teachers of English had no subsidiary or collateral agency to do for literature and the teaching of literature what was being done for composition and for language. The Executive Committee of the NCTE authorized the establishment of a permanent Commission with rotating membership; the initial members were appointed in the summer of 1964, and the first meeting was held early in November of that year. Since then, there have been three two-day independent meetings of the full membership, plus two meetings in conjunction with the annual convention of the NCTE, plus separate working meetings of committees of the Commission.
As first conceived, the Commission would concern itself primarily with literature in education—and at all levels, from preschool to graduate school, and especially the middle ranges, high school and college. The NCTE seemed most appropriate for such a concern, since it is the only national organization having the span required. But from the outset, it was recognized that literature does not belong solely to the classroom, much as we teachers may at times seem to imply it does, or much as some of our students may seem ready to believe it does. In the planning and in the activities of the Commission from the first, one eye has been kept on problems related to literature in society at large, as well as in education. The membership on the Commission reflects that breadth of concern. There are members from the various levels and types of education relating to literature; and along with these members who teach literature there are two members who produce literature: the novelist John Hersey and the poet William Stafford. One member is the editor of Harper's magazine; another is a librarian. In addition, representatives of other organizations concerned with literature in the academic world are members of the Commission: the Modern Language Association, the College English Association, the American Library Association, and the International Reading Association. It is worth adding, I think, by way of indicating the degree of approval the idea of a Commission had at the beginning, that of the more than twenty initially asked to become members, all accepted but one, who had a conflict he could not remedy.

Several considerations have influenced the growth of the idea and the plans for the Commission on Literature. One consideration is the example of the extensive and radical development that has taken place in the teaching of mathematics, the sciences, and the modern languages, and that apparently will take place also in the area of the social sciences. This development has been prompted, as we know, by the sense of emergency which followed the appearance of the first Russian Sputnik, and it has been supported by funds such as were not available—or even imagined—before, new funds mainly from the federal government. But the developments in the teaching of science and modern foreign languages have owed much to the efforts and the imagination—we might even say the daring—of the teachers and their professional organizations. The new programs in mathematics and the sciences which have been moving over the country, were developed at ESI (Educational Services Incorporated), which has been directed chiefly by professors at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It is less surprising, I suppose, that ESI has been amply financed by foundation grants (“We are a frightfully expensive organization,” one of the directors told the Commission on Literature when we spent a day visiting ESI last spring)—it is less surprising, I say, that funds have been provided than that Nobel Prize winning physicists and other comparably distinguished scientists and mathematicians have been willing to leave their normal work and spend time in joint efforts to work out courses of study from the elementary grades onward.

If anyone needed—and surely no one does—if anyone needed evidence that literature, along with other subjects among the humanities, is being swept into a new age, not far in the wake of the sciences and the social sciences, he
need only take notice of the new funds becoming available, chiefly from Congressional appropriations. Actually, English teachers and English departments have all along been applauded and rewarded, at least moderately, for their practical services in teaching oral and written composition, reading comprehension, and linguistics. The deans of medical schools I've known, along with the deans of engineering, have been great supporters of English, by which they have meant remedial English mainly. One dean of engineering, some years back, liked to tell how some of his engineering students were majoring in freshman English. These deans were glad we continued to teach Shakespeare, they said. For when a doctor has put in his day at the office or a scientist his day in the laboratory,... You know the reasoning. My university has had for some time a program of development and teaching in gerontology. We in the English department have made jokes about going into the field of literature for the aging and applying to the National Institutes of Health for funds to support ourselves and our students. Those were good jokes—I suppose they were. But I have a tinge of fear that our jokes may have been on ourselves more than anyone else.

At any rate, we have not laid out research projects on literature for the aging, or on the therapeutic properties of this or that piece of literature. We have continued the even tenor of our ways of teaching literature. We have taken our position in education for granted, and others have taken us for granted. Of course every grade, every high school, every college, every university must teach literature and hence must have teachers of literature. But as we realize that new developments in governmental support will give the teaching of literature a measure of prosperity—and we suppose commensurate prestige—we can no longer expect to be, or will we be satisfied to be, taken for granted. A major purpose of the Commission on Literature is to help discover and develop means of using the new resources and the new opportunities to greatest advantage.

The Commission on Literature expects to remain an agency for ideas, theories, speculations, proposals, and policies. It expects not to carry out projects of experiment or development, but rather to propose undertakings which other agencies, organizations, or individuals will carry out; when appropriate it will serve in a supervisory or consultative capacity. Bringing interested groups together, or suggesting joint action by various agencies, promises to be one of the most useful functions of the Commission. The following may be mentioned as examples of projects initiated by the Commission and now in progress:

1. A pamphlet, a sort of casebook on literary censorship
2. A series of essays on literature in the elementary grades
3. A comparable series on teaching literature in high school
4. A statement of the position of literature in education and in society at large.

Other matters proposed but as yet not in progress have to do with the literature included in humanities courses in schools and colleges; the effects of speed-up programs on the total curriculum in literature; the literature chosen for students of various levels of ability and various curricula in schools and
colleges; means of encouraging the writing and the publication of books especially useful in education; areas of understanding and misunderstanding between the educators on the one hand and the authors and publishers of books used in education on the other. Plans on the last of these topics have been held up, pending some resolution of the copyright issue. It may be that further delay will be desirable, until there is a new law—or the attempt to write a new law is abandoned, as it seems now may be the case. When the matter of the law is settled, when emotions have subsided, and when the spokesmen for publishers and authors have time to remember that teachers are in effect their constituents and their friends, then the Commission may be able to encourage or possibly sponsor joint efforts to produce understandings, attitudes, practices, policies, or even codes which will benefit all concerned. Because the Commission on Literature has members who can speak for teachers at all levels, librarians, authors, editors, and publishers, it seems a plausible agent to initiate such efforts.

Let me note that the Executive Committee and the officers and the staff of the NCTE have given the Commission both encouragement and scope for its activities. The Commission was invited to sponsor the Affiliate Breakfast at the NCTE meeting in Boston last November, for example, and it has been invited also to assist in planning a sequence of programs on literature for the convention in Houston next fall. A member of the Commission will deliver the address introducing this sequence.

When the twenty-four members of the Commission sat down at the long table for its first meeting in New York a year and a half ago, there was room for uneasiness, as Louise Rosenblatt, Robert Carlsen, James R. Squire, Albert Kitzhaber, and John H. Fisher will recall. One could imagine the group flying apart, into twenty-four segments, and marching away, each beating his own drum and listening to no other. But there was no such a flying apart, though there were a few awkward hiatuses in the threads of discussion the first day. The members have come to realize pointedly, I believe, that as representatives from different provinces in the literary world they have common interests and common goals, and to realize also that mutual usefulness need not depend on agreement at all points.

These sketchy notes on the Commission on Literature may suggest impossibly broad and diverse activities. But to my mind breadth and variety of affiliation are among its greatest assets. The signs are good, I think, that, rather than cancel each other out because of their great diversity, the members of the Commission will contribute strength not likely to be generated in a more homogeneous assemblage.

I remarked a minute ago that our age, the space age, has moved us irrecoverably beyond our former ways of thinking. The universe of Jules Verne or that of Edgar Allan Poe's Hans Pfaall is here now; the creators of science fiction and the far-out comic strips are having to scramble forward in breathless haste, for we have already homesteaded in their earlier realms of fantasy. The concepts of weightlessness and of space-time relationships have grown commonplace among us. Notice, too, what has been happening to our figures of speech and our figurative words (upon which we rely to suggest the greatest
subtleties of our thought and imagination): light as a feather, for example, adrift, earthbound. You can make your own list.

As is natural and proper, our scientists go along comfortably with this movement; they are both agents and products. And as they pursue and capture and interpret new molecules, they are prepared to dispel age-old mysteries and to cast error behind them. For in science the past can yield nothing to the future except error and curious relics.

Our colleagues, the social scientists, are busy discovering and describing the present. They may go on to predict the future or to try controlling conditions in a way to determine the future, but they work from standards of their own making within the framework of their own observation, subject to the methodology prevailing among them at a given time.

These remarks may seem to imply derogatory opinions of science and social science, either in education or the world outside. But I have no such intention. My purpose is only to suggest the sector each occupies in the total sphere which is education, or the life of modern man. Going further, I want to suggest, in equally broad terms, the sector appropriate to the humanities, and inside that the smaller sector which literature can claim. Through this image of the sphere and its sectors, I would like to say that in all logic literature should stay within its own bounds, that it should not attempt to usurp the function belonging to either of its two partners, and that whenever it borrows the materials or the methods of the other two, it should still maintain its identity and its distinctive qualities.

Again, if I have seemed to imply that literature’s characteristic look should be backward over the shoulder, or that literary study should be antiquarian and impatient with the new, let me say that such is by no means my intention. I would say, further, that we have had dramatic examples in the history of education to teach us what results from a failure to acknowledge the present and to realize that there may be a future different from the past. In many institutions within our own time, the classics and (strangely) philosophy and the modern foreign languages have had this experience and have had to reorientate their thinking.

To curb my temptation to speculate and generalize, let me come back to literature, and more specifically literature as it concerns us in English education. English departments and most English teachers teach much besides literature; I realize that, of course, and that the Conference on English Education has a similar breadth. But for the moment I have in mind the teacher of literature.

As good advice as any I have encountered recently for the teacher of literature was offered by Vice President Hubert Humphrey a few weeks ago when he addressed a banquet celebrating the establishment of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The burden of his speech was that the humanities should remain humanities, that they should not undertake to justify their existence, or to justify the new governmental support, by trying to act like something else. He would not argue, I suppose, that a scholar whose specialty is modern poetry, say, should ignore new methodological approaches, or should refuse to quantify or to computerize (to use phrases we hear considerably nowadays)
when his purposes are advanced by using such means; but I take it he would argue that in doing so the scholar should not try to be something he is not and should assume that he is worth most as a scholar in modern poetry, totally un-homogenized and unabashed. Do you recall Henry David Thoreau’s note in his journal about his relations with Ralph Waldo Emerson? Thoreau found that often in the company of Emerson he tried to imagine himself somebody else in order to carry on the sort of reluctance or even disagreement he said Emerson’s manner seemed to assume. In the attempt, Thoreau added, he lost his time and nearly lost his identity.

You need not have pointed out to you the moral I would draw here: As teachers of literature we should not borrow essays from economics or sociology or journalism to teach. We should not sell our students short by giving them second- or third- or fourth-rate literature on the assumption that literature of the first class is out of their reach. We can, for another thing, strive for a balance between the present and the past, remembering that unlike science and the social sciences, literature has a long past, and that its present cannot in fact be separated from its past. Perhaps what this says is that the teacher of literature needs a composite of balance, tolerance, patience, alertness, reverence, and an understanding of the literary experience he wants his students to have.

A piece of literary interpretation I remember reading a few years ago had the assertion toward the end, “According to my critical method,” such and such is true. Now I happened to know the writer and I was reasonably sure he did not believe that such and such is true; but whether he believed it or not was not an issue with him in the essay. The issue was that the critical method produced such and such as the conclusion—Q.E.D. I would have felt better if he had let me know whether he thought the conclusion his method produced was true or false.

It was a lifelong habit with Herman Melville, you will recall, perhaps a compulsion, to look beyond conventions, traditions, and institutions—to strike through the mask, as Ahab phrased it. You may recall also that Melville tells in each of two books, White-Jacket and Mardi, how an intricate surgical operation was completed and there was great admiration for the skill, the finesse of the surgeon, for the perfection of the technique. Then he notes that in each instance it became known, casually and as an irrelevant detail obtruding indecently—it became known that the patient had died during the operation.

What I want to say here, continuing my sermonizing, is that we should keep method and technique in the service of our subject, not the reverse. It would be worse than foolish not to take advantage of every device of modern equipment, and it would be short-sighted not to encourage all efforts to adapt modern technology to our purposes. There are some among us who would spurn the mechanical pencil as an evil intrusion of modern materialism or modern mechanization, whichever they hate most. Such teachers will probably keep us from overloading our classrooms with electronic gadgets, but there will always be with us the danger of allowing methods of literary study to obscure the literature being studied or allowing collateral works to overshadow the literary work—the danger of allowing some side-show, perhaps we can say, to put the performance in the main tent out of business.
There can be no quarrel with fads, no more with fads in literary study, I suppose, than with fads in women's hats. In both instances, the fads seem inevitable and right while they are in vogue. But when in their turn they have been replaced, they both look to be something less than inevitable, if not downright silly, and we may discover that they have led us far astray. A literary scholar, with a memory extending back several decades, made a list the other day of the successive eras he has observed: the new humanism, the new criticism, and now, he said, the new bibliography (meaning textual criticism). His tone in adding the third series seemed to say: "We've been here so many times before." These are not simply fads, of course, and let me not stop on them, except to note that in varying degrees with various practitioners, they reduce the concern for the literature itself and thus inevitably defeat the purposes for which they exist.

Verbal analysis, paraphrase of metaphor, assembling patterns of image, symbol, and structure—this composite method of literary study has prevailed among us so long, particularly in schools and colleges, that to many it has become synonymous with literary study. It is prominent in the testing for English in the Advanced Placement Program and in the achievement test in the Graduate Record Examinations series; and it will surely be prominent in the literature tests being constructed for the College Entrance Examination Board and for the projected national assessment of education.

The era of verbal and structural analysis passed its apex some time back, though it is still very much with us, and we can hope not to lose the considerable gains it has brought us. The enthusiasm and the force it once commanded are going now into two other channels. Those among us with leanings toward speculative and philosophical generalization have veered off sharply into critical and aesthetic theory, creating and using a special vocabulary, and touching base in actual literary works no more than occasionally.

Into the second channel have gone those leaning toward scientific manipulation and the application of intricate techniques. They have begun with the unquestioned need for pure texts for our authors and the equally unquestioned fact that we have only pathetically inadequate texts for most American authors and some English authors also; and they have set out to supply the need. They are the textual scholars. Happily, I think, they have assumed that the best text is often perfected by many decisions of the textual editor, who first considers manuscripts, printed editions, and all other pertinent evidence, and chooses the forms he believes closest to the author's final preference, free from the intrusion of copyeditor, friend, or wife.

This procedure, you can see, places staggering responsibility on the textual editor, the one who is to establish the text which will be labeled definitive. The Hinman Collator is a clever machine and it is satisfactory for the tiny portion of the procedure where it can be used, that is, in comparing two copies of one edition, though my brief experience with it suggests that it is in a stage of development about equal to that of Eli Whitney's cotton gin. I wonder—parenthetically—whether we might not ask some of our friends in applied science or engineering to develop for us a collator on Mr. Hinman's model fitting to the space age. Of course a collator making the sophisticated use of lenses, filaments,
and electronics I am suggesting would cost a few hundred thousand dollars rather than the few thousand dollars of the present model. Even with the help of machine collation, I started to say, the role of the textual editor is crucial, and as a consequence there has been for several years a running debate, not yet settled, as to the precedence of the literary scholar or the technical editor in determining a text. There are some who argue for the clinical, critically antiseptic—others would say critically sterile—establishment of an author's text. I have become aware of the debate while serving on one of the several editing teams now at work, and I continue to believe that nothing will be lost, to say the least, if the one managing the technical steps in fixing a text is a scholar who can speak with some assurance, some authority on the author of the text in question. I'm not sure, in fact, that anyone besides such a literary scholar is capable of making the decisions required in perfecting a literary text.

It is my fear, you see, that we may let methods, special techniques, or tangential materials obscure the literature we have in hand—and we must remember that literature, pristine and uncluttered, before we add our clutter, forms the only basis for including any literary courses in any curriculum. If we become so enthralled with instruments from scientific laboratories, so concerned to master intricate critical techniques; if we grow so fond of devices and methodologies that we forget our main purpose, I'm afraid we'll be past caring whether our subject, like Melville's patient, has died in the process.

To speak positively, in conclusion, after speaking negatively in much of what I have said—to speak positively, if we remember the essential nature and the essential qualities of literature, if we remember that the place of literature in education and in society cannot be taken by any kind or any degree of scientism; if we guard the perspective and the equanimity fitting on the humanist, we may hope to see literature merit the special support it is receiving in education nowadays, and we who teach literature may hope to help it contribute its special ingredient to the total final product, which is still in the process of being formed—the space age.