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Syracuse in Literature

Donald A. Dike

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Chancellor Emeritus William Pearson Tolley presents
the Dedication Address

THE COURIER

A COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
on the
DEDICATION OF THE ERNEST S. BIRD LIBRARY

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES VOLUME X, NUMBER 4

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Syracuse in Literature

by Donald A. Dike

It is a privilege to participate in the dedication of this fine building, which has already given and which will continue, increasingly, to give so much intellectual pleasure to faculty and students alike. At the center of any university stands, or ought to stand, its library. That Syracuse University has erected a library worthy of that crucial position is cause for legitimate pride.

To say that the library is central to university life is equivalent to saying that language is central to the life aimed at wisdom, the means and principle of its activity. The little old lady in tennis shoes was more profound than she knew: the famous little old lady who remarked, "How do I know what I think until I've said it?" So the Socratic dialectic has to do with the self-correcting movement of the mind and with the serious play of complex ideas; it has to do, equally and indistinguishably, with the dramatic interaction and discovery of verbal possibilities: meanings. As for Plato's most remarkable pupil, Aristotle considered Rhetoric and Poetic to be intrinsic and indispensible components of his great philosophic synthesis. One could cite further testimony; for example, Shelley's immense claim for the function and authority of poetry. But the list of witnesses would be virtually endless. Intellectual history, both at high tide and low tide, in its periods of bright achievement and in its dark ages, confirms the truth discerned at its origin: that the word which was in the beginning is what we cannot do without and shall be at the end – shall be, if a viable human culture is to be.

So that a library such as this one is far more than a necessary service to the university. As chief custodian of language, as given over wholly, purely, to the preservation and increase of language, its significance extends beyond the university into the total community. The destruction of the library at Alexandria was not a local but an historic catastrophe; the burning of books in more recent times has seemed a signal atrocity to many not directly involved and indeed has become a violent figure for, a key paradigm of, cultural regression. It does not seem too extravagant, then, to suggest that today's dedication is also an occasion for paying honor to something larger, though less tangible, than a particular building: to a cardinal human value embodied in a cultural institution that holds itself aloof from and superior to political partisanship, in the interest not of some or another faction but of us all.

It seems fitting, moreover, that this afternoon's session, this symposium, should concern itself specifically with literature, language in its most immediate actualization. The word "literature" is being used with some breadth, for the present occasion, to include a range of writing divisible into

three main kinds: criticism, scholarship, and poetry. And the last term can be taken – as it traditionally has – to apply to any work of the verbal imagination: fiction and drama, as well as poetry in the narrow sense. These three kinds cover a great deal of the territory of letters. What are the limits of criticism, we well may ask, since man's argument with his objectified experience, that is, his attempt to formulate its terms and to appraise it, has led him into such ostensibly unaesthetic provinces as are claimed by psychology, philosophy, and the social sciences? What is not embraced by scholarship – although the word seems inexact and misleading, stressing the performer rather than the performance? What does not relate to the accumulation and classification of knowledge? As for poetry, Aristotle, for one, speaks of it in such a way as to suggest that it names all the arts and indeed any mode of imitation. In Hesiod and also even in Horace, it is difficult to be sure which muse stands for what. How poetry is to be disengaged from life, or the rest of life, defined as a thing in itself, has occupied both critics and poets: Wallace Stevens as much as I.A. Richards.

It is, in consequence, equally true that the three kinds overlap to the extent that differentiating them may appear arbitrary: an endeavor to impose neatness and symmetry. Matthew Arnold united two of the kinds, poetry and criticism, in a memorable, though not entirely lucid, definition. T.S. Eliot went further and proposed that every major poem is implicitly but importantly a criticism of its antecedents. That accumulated knowledge is crucial to both criticism and poetry is too self-evident, a proposition to require more than a nod of assent. Or should be too self-evident: a qualification evoked by distressing implications and consequences of the contemporary cult of "relevance." Nonetheless, the discrimination is useful. It permits a focus on particular stress, interest, intention, point of view. It attests to the diversity contained in a shared enterprise. And it enables us to assemble here three distinct voices, each characteristically identified with a mode of literary expression; and then, that much being said in the way of provisional classification, each to be heard as an unencumbered, an unrestricted individuality; each speaking, essentially, for itself.

The speakers have, in different ways, a connection with Syracuse University, and the fact of the connection partially justifies the general, the conveniently loose, title of this symposium: Syracuse in Literature. Since none of the speakers is likely to address himself to that title, I would like, before introducing them, briefly to elaborate on it; I believe I am expected to. Discounting at once the irreverent interpretation prompted by the musical comedy adaptation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, I must suppose that the chosen title alludes to literary activity at Syracuse University that complements the custodial function of the library: activity in the three modes designated: criticism, scholarship, poetry. The subject is probably a very large one, inviting inventories derived from historical research. Not having done elaborate homework – and also out of uneasiness at any

apparent show of institutional self-praise – I will be more nearly anecdotal than historical, my remarks to be taken as selective not for judgmental reasons but because of the limits of personal point of view. So much for apology and disclaimer.

Despite its longevity, its ancient roots in the Tenth Book of *The Republic* and also in early Hebraic-Christian exegesis, criticism has not been a serious subject of academic study for more than a handful of decades. It was sometimes taught, yes, but almost invariably as a body of knowledge, chronologically ordered, to be learned in much the same way as a sequence of historical events might be learned. What, the student was asked, was Longinus' definition of the Sublime? What were Wordsworth's opinions about the proper language of poetry? These questions have their measure of importance; they relate to criticism, but neither deals with criticism as subject of study. The distinction is between criticism as valuable information to be rehearsed and memorized and criticism as an activity that invites the participation of amateurs as well as professionals: a problematic activity which, on the authority of the legacy of the past, involves choice among many possible attitudes and procedures: choice, knowledge, of course, taste (but not just "I know what I like"), and disciplined imagination. It is criticism as a subject, rather than an object, of study: as an action that invites participation in the critical process rather than notation or commitment to memory – that is relatively new to university education. I. A. Richards was a pioneer; his *Practical Criticism*, published in 1929, was based on a classroom experiment and was expressly intended to revolutionize educational philosophy. It is hard to persuade students that Richards' book is a monument of innovation, hard because its direct and indirect effects have been so thoroughly assimilated by today's pedagogy. It is sometimes hard for *me* to appreciate the book's one-time novelty, because when I joined this university's faculty in 1946, criticism had long been taught as a fusion of theory and practice: as ideas and attitudes which students were asked not merely to observe but to share.

As regards the teaching of criticism, Syracuse was, I think, pedagogically precocious, and while the reasons for this are many, including a departmental chairman free from doctrinaire opinions, the executive reason was the late Professor Leonard S. Brown.

Leonard Brown came to Syracuse in the mid-twenties. He grew up through the period of literary modernism and he understood much more quickly than many of his contemporaries – including those who were publishing essays in little magazines about the new, the then-avant garde, literature – that writers like Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence, Faulkner were here to stay, were part of the tradition and should be taught. He got such writers into the curriculum. Simultaneously, and perhaps even more importantly, he got criticism-as-a-subject out of its hoary wraps, treated it as a live opportunity rather than as a dead museum-piece, introduced ideas and systems of ideas at

the time deemed at best inappropriate, at worst taboo, and kept asking his students questions, questions.

In the middle thirties' Brown was fired from the University for bringing up dialectical materialism in his class. The Syracuse evening newspaper blazoned his dismissal in a front-page headline – gown in those days being news to town. On the following day he was rehired.

Leonard Brown was not influential through his writing, but it is hard to overestimate the influence of his teaching on three generations of students. Many themselves became teachers, and through them the influence proliferated. An obvious and distinguished example is the late Stanley Edgar Hyman, whose first book, *The Armed Vision,* one of the earliest studies of twentieth century literary criticism, acknowledges its indebtedness to Leonard's course. Another of Stanley Hyman's books, *The Tangled Bank,* which treats the systems of Darwin, Marx, Frazer, and Freud as dramatic structures, also has a root in Leonard's teaching. In suggesting this I do not mean to lessen Stanley Hyman's achievement. The reputation that he deservedly earned as a teacher at Bennington, his prolific talent for criticism, reviewing, editing, being a sometime anonymous "Our Man Stanley" for *The New Yorker's* Talk of the Town – these extend as far beyond influence as did the gift for fiction of his wife, Shirley Jackson, who graduated from Syracuse in the same year as her husband.

I received a letter several days ago, asking me to supply data of Leonard Brown's birth, marriages, death, etc. to a former student, vintage about 1940, now a university professor at another institution. This person, whom I do not know, despite being not in literature but in the social sciences, thinks of Leonard, dead now for more than thirteen years, as having done most to shape his mind. He wants to make appropriate dedication in a forthcoming book.

Leonard Brown did another thing, the last among many I shall mention. He believed that students should have available a multiplicity of viewpoints and also that they should be put in as immediate a relation as possible with their subject-matter. He got the university administration to support his idea and so was able to initiate the practice of bringing here for visits of varying duration practicing critics who had achieved a certain mark but who were as yet relatively unrecognized within the academy. Among others, Malcolm Cowley, who is both critic and literary historian of his own generation of writers, came early and has returned many times since. Kenneth Burke came for a six-weeks stay and has returned; in the late 1930's during his first visit, he gave a series of lectures in Leonard's class, out of which emerged the title essay of *The Philosophy of Literary Form,* surely a crucial watershed or change of slope – to borrow two of Burke's own metaphors – in the recent history of critical theory and practice.

This informal program of visits by critics outside this university, and sometimes pretty much outside any university, has endured. Granville Hicks,

whose best known work, *The Great Tradition*, attempted a Marxist criticism, was a visiting professor in 1960. And the late Delmore Schwartz spent three of the last four years of his life here with an appointment that the University hoped would become permanent. Delmore was most widely known, perhaps, for his poetry and fiction, but this was because his abundant criticism was not collected and published in book form before his death. Its importance is suggested by the paramount role it played in such journals as *Partisan Review, The Kenyon Review, The Southern Review* during the years – the forties and fifties – when these journals were the dominant, and even dominating, vehicles of literary sensibility and opinion in this country.

During the late forties and the fifties, after practical criticism, previously almost exclusively the property of the literary magazines, had gotten a foothold in the academy, there occurred in many American universities a dramatic confrontation and conflict. Scholar and critic discovered themselves to be in bitter opposition. Scholarship charged criticism, particularly the so-called New Criticism, with a lack of historical sense, with an ignorance of literary source and background, with an ignorance of history, with simple ignorance. Or it expressed indignation that other modes of criticism should find ideas derived from sociology and psychology, the ideas, say, of Marx and Freud, germane to literary study. The critics, on the other hand, charged scholarship with an obsession for circumstantial information at the expense of works of the imagination, literature itself. They accused the scholars of either ignoring literature proper or treating it as a fact rather than an experience; they charged the scholars, finally, with an inability to read. The conflict generated a considerable amount of heat – and also some amusement. It was analogous to the eighteenth century battle between the ancients and the moderns, to the battle of the books; and the books were on the one hand the *Publications of the Modern Language Association* and on the other *Partisan Review;* on the one hand A.O. Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being* and on the other, Cleanth Brooks' *Well-Wrought Urn* – or for practical teaching purposes, *Understanding Poetry.* Like the eighteenth century battle, this one spilled into mock heroic, and as with the earlier battle, neither side won. Or else both sides won, for each certainly gained something from the other.

This battle largely, though not entirely, circumvented Syracuse. One reason I have already suggested: that the English Department at least was already innoculated to criticism, it having established itself long before the shooting broke out elsewhere. A second reason is that most members of the faculty deeply concerned with criticism – and not as mere object of knowledge but as process of discovery – were, and are – for I am thinking particularly of Walter Sutton – themselves accomplished scholars. Conversely, scholars like Sanford Meech and Mary Marshall were and are keenly interested in critical theory and practice. So there was nothing much to fight about: a matter of regret to a few but not to the many. Scholarship and

criticism have been comfortable companions here, neither quite sure where it leaves off and the other begins.

The case of poetry is a curious one. Its central position in the curriculum of the humanities has never seriously been questioned, but until recently there was, in many or most American universities, a strange indifference to the fact that for poetry to be, it has to be written. An abiding interest in poetry managed to go hand in hand with an absence of interest in the poet, the live poet. The New Criticism contributed to this ambivalence, for it preferred, by and large, to think of imaginative literature as an object rather than an utterance: as existing in a relation to the reader rather than to the writer; and it was ready to tell the latter that what he thought he was doing, his intention, might have no more than a glancing or even misleading connection with what had been actually done. D.H. Lawrence's well-known advice: "Don't trust the author, trust the book," got re-couched as: Distrust the author, trust critical method. And scholarship in the person of John Livingstone Lowes proved that the books Coleridge read themselves wrote "Kubla Khan."

So there was no real place for the poet in the university. He was there only vicariously, in the library and the bookstore. Oh, poets did indeed teach; they had, after all, to live. But their teaching and their writing were independent, and close to unaware, of each other. One, a course in Shakespeare or more likely, in freshman English, went on inside the academy; the other went on, time permitting, after the themes were graded, outside the academy – outside its recognition, and in some instances without its approval. Partly because of this imposed split in the activity of the teacher-poet, a split, a hyphen, that threatened his personality, college teaching was not thought to be the right job for a writer; when sympathy turned to sneer, the usual stress was on compromise.

The radical change in this situation, a change that occurred earlier here than in many universities, was due in great part to students. Young people have in recent decades – increasingly since World War II – taken going to college to be a matter of course. They have gone to college, instead of into a trade, and some of them have wanted to write, an important few of these with very good cause. Just about as old as a cockney surgeon's apprentice who happened to be a genius, they have taken their own writing to be too serious to be fractured off from their reading; they have wanted it to be considered part of their education. A John Keats may not turn up in the classooom, but when an undergraduate student named, for example, Joyce Carol Oates quietly leaves the manuscript of a novel on the academic desk, then the academy had better fashion an appropriate response. And it did. It learned from its students that in selected cases the *writing* of fiction and of poetry should not be dismissed as extra-curricular but treated with the same gravity, though with less emphasis, as the *reading* of fiction and poetry.

The students, the genuinely talented students, made their point. It then

remained for the university to draw the obvious inference. If we have stopped thinking of writing merely as a tool, if we have started to regard excellence in writing as an end in itself and as educational achievement, how then can we maintain our traditional reserve towards practicing poets and novelists? Should they not be embraced by the university; embraced not merely as teachers, teachers of composition or of anything else, but above all as writers, contributors to this library and to all libraries?

Syracuse University has been fortunate in the writers who have come here to be a part of its faculty. I think it can congratulate itself, too, on the writers it has encouraged as students and then let loose on the outer world. By accommodating poetry alongside of scholarship and criticism, this university has not solved, any more than other universities, the ancient and persisting problem of what education should really be, but it has, I think, usefully enlarged its scope and redefined its function.