

THE SEACOAST OF BOHEMIA:

Truth in Literature*

That doughy classicist Ben Jonson was not one to beat lightly the failings of others. Much as he loved Shakespeare—if we take his commendatory verses in the 1623 folio to speak the truth—he was not above remarking in private, to William Drummond of Hawthornden, during the winter of 1618/19, that Shakespeare “wanted Art.”¹ He wanted besides, Jonson felt, an adequate knowledge of geography. In *The Winter's Tale*, he gave to Bohemia, the home of Polixenes and Florizel and the adopted land of Perdita, a seacoast. In Bohemia, said Jonson to Drummond, “there is no sea near by some 100 miles.”

The view of the poet as liar goes back at least as far as Plato. The critics of literature—those for, as well as those against—have entered many a tilt and tournament over the matter. Sir Philip Sidney argued gravely that the poet affirms nothing and therefore never lies. “. . . though he recount things not true,” says Sidney, “yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not. . . .” In support of his argument, Sidney says reasonably enough that men do not expect truth in the fables of Aesop—“for who thinks that Aesop writ it for actually true were well worthy to have his name chronicled among the beasts he writeth of.”² What Sidney might have said of Keat's boner in “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,” is perhaps another question, however. Many a student brought up on Keats will remember Cortes—not Balboa—as the discoverer of the Pacific Ocean, and Keats *did* expect to be believed.

Doubtless both Sidney and Jonson would have agreed that Keats was at fault. I don't know what Sidney would have said of the seacoast of Bohemia. But the issue they raise is no light one. What, after all, is the truth of literature?

I raise the question because it seems to me our own profession, on the whole, has not done terribly well by literature. *Serious* problems of communication, we are likely to feel, reside in real life—in the stresses and strains of politics and interpersonal relations, in the marketplace, on television, in small groups. Literature we leave, usually with relief, to interpretation and theatre, where it often looks to us like some embarrassing vestige from old concerns. Poems, plays, stories, novels—fictions, after all. Maybe not *lies*—that seems a bit harsh; but not really a serious concern of serious men and women. Or serious men, at least. Bohemia doesn't have a seacoast. Indeed, Shakespeare's Bohemia is like no Bohemia or land or sea.

I should argue in reply that literature is as much a fact of life as any other of the

concerns to which scholars in communication nowadays address themselves. I should argue that from it I have probably learned more about communication between human beings than I have ever encountered in communication texts. I should argue that nowhere else have the codes through which and in which men and women interact been so sensitively and delicately explored, to the immense profit of readers. The poet *does* affirm, though to say this is not simply to contradict Sidney. Aesop's beasts, after all, are parts of the code, and they function affirmatively.

What Henry James once called “the old evangelical hostility” to fiction as wickedness is gone from today's world. *That* charge we willingly abandon. But the other charge, that fiction is “not serious,” lingers—along, often, with the feeling which James attributed to many of its critics that fiction is often either “too frivolous to be edifying” or “too serious to be diverting.”

James is doubtless right in arguing that the only obligation one may impose upon a novel in advance is that it be interesting. It must be free to find its way to that goal, and prescriptions in advance will only interfere with its progress. The ways by which the novel accomplishes its goal, says James, “are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say.” “Experience,” James goes on to say, “is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. . . . The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience. . . .” And then James gives what seems to me to be a splendid bit of advice: “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!”³ On most of us, I fear, much is lost. Literature can help us redress the balance.

James has the highest regard for his art, of course. And he is quite clear that not all literature lives up to his expectations. The quality of the mind of the writer matters greatly. Some of the ink that is spilled might better have remained in the bottle. (I must

remember that that is *not* where ink is normally kept these days!) But at its best, literature does give us the mind in process. Nowhere else is human sensibility so sensitively displayed.

It is not my wish here to seem to be arguing for the study of literature as *opposed* to other forms of knowledge. Far from that. One of the virtues of our Association is, think, the variety of its intentions, though I said at the meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association some ten days ago I think there is a common center for those intentions.⁴ I do wish to argue for the study of literature as being near the core of our concerns, however—not peripheral, tangential, nor eccentric. Literature gives us, in its plenitude, a vast record of the failures and achievements of men and women in their attempts to come to grips with their lives.

I was about to say “an incredible record,” but that reminds me that credibility is what we are to be talking about. Let's go back to the seacoast of Bohemia.

In his story of Leontes and Hermione and Perdita, Shakespeare stands near the end of his life as a playwright. *The Tempest* followed, and whatever of Shakespeare is in the play *Henry VIII*. But *The Winter's Tale* caps the exploration begun in *Pericles* and continued in *Cymbeline*. It is a story of parents and children, of loss and restoration, of jealousy and forgiveness. It is an intimate glimpse of the “chamber of consciousness” (to use James's phrase) of a great writer near the close of his career. And like all of the work of any great writer, it needs ultimately to be looked at in the context of that writer's total body of work. I can't, in the time I have, manage that kind of full look, but we can at least catch glimpses.

In the earlier romantic comedies, Shakespeare tackled the problems of love and romance. In play after play, he explored the elements which seem to make love work. Clearly he thought that women were better at it than men, and in large part because women seemed intuitively to grasp things which men had to learn by experience. That self-love, for example, makes true love difficult. That concern for others must often take precedence over concern for oneself. That wit and laughter help. That it is not always the brightest who are the best. That reason must sometimes bow to faith. That a knowledge of our own shortcomings ought to make us tolerant of others. That generosity and compassion are perhaps the greatest virtues to be found in life. That God does often indeed seem to help those who know best how to help themselves—and that to sit back and wait for God to act is sometimes to be unfair to heaven.

In the romantic comedies, love always leads to marriage; and in those plays, marriage seems to be the capstone of experience. The sun is always shining at the end of the romantic comedies, though sometimes through a little cloud or two. I do not mean

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*Presidential Address, Speech Communication Association, Washington D. C., December 2, 1977

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to make the plays sound like homilies; they are not Sidney's sugar-coated pills. But whatever their absurdities (for they are, after all, comedies), they give us lives in operation in carefully articulated worlds, where the codes of communication are masterfully spelled out.

But in *The Winter's Tale* (a sad tale's best for winter, says the young boy Mamillius) the marriage of Leontes and Hermione comes upon terrible days; whatever lessons Leontes may have learned prior to marriage, he has new ones to learn now. That's the trouble with lessons; one forgets too easily what one has learned. Or learns that the problem has really never been understood at all. In the madness of his jealousy, King Leontes condemns his wife and sends his infant daughter Perdita to be exposed and left to die in the desert. Hermione, the Queen, is reported to have died; in actual fact, she goes into seclusion, where she remains some fifteen years. When her daughter Perdita is through a series of chances restored to Leontes, Hermione permits herself also to rejoin him, in a highly theatrical scene involving her spectacular stepping from act to life, and the parents and child are once again united.

At the moment of that final reunion, Shakespeare gives Hermione only one speech—7 lines out of a total of 155 in the scene—and it is addressed to her daughter, not to the husband whose jealousy caused the separation in the first place. But ask any class of students what goes on in the mind of Hermione as she comes back to life, and they will not lack words to describe her feelings. In a very early play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare had another scene where one of his heroines stood speechless for 100 lines, but there it was impossible to imagine what on earth poor Silvia could have been thinking. She seemed to stand speechless because the playwright couldn't for the life of him imagine what she would have said. If she had said anything, she might indeed have taken the playwright to task for ineptness. But in *The Winter's Tale* Hermione doesn't speak because she doesn't need to—can't, because feelings are too deep and too full for words. She can forgive Leontes for what he has done, but she can never forget it, nor can he. The shadow of what he has done will hang over both of them for the remainder of their lives, and no words and no deeds can alter that fact. Still, life must go on. Perdita is home again, their child—and she is not to blame for what has happened; she must not be made to pay. And so the world begins again, renewing itself, doing its best to profit from past error. *The Winter's Tale* makes clear that the capstone of the romantic comedies, marriage, is only the beginning. Leontes needs to learn again—if he has ever learned it—the need for faith, for generosity, for compassion. Jealousy consumes its owner; love reaches out and sustains.

It cannot be said, with Sidney, that *The*

Winter's Tale affirms nothing, though it can be said that Bohemia indeed has no seacoast. *The Winter's Tale* affirms, finally, within its own more and less than actual world, the worth of living. And it demonstrates, in its ultimate scene, the truth of Anthony Brandt's remark, in the current November issue of *The Atlantic*,⁶ that "works of art, real works of art, quite often take as their subject matter the distance between what people say and what they think and feel,"—and, I might add, what they often do.

But it's only a play. Only. Historically, that "only" has been the refuge of those who find literature fun but useless, worth paying for but not worth heeding. And true enough, literature does in its mysterious way entertain us—"mysterious" because we often find ourselves responding raptly to things in themselves no way amusing—to Lear, to Macbeth, to Hamlet, to Othello. Pleasure is surely one of the uses of literature—joy is functional in our lives—but it is difficult to think of the death of Lear as pleasurable. We are moved rather, I think, by the fact that Lear's death is true. Not actual, but true. The actor playing Lear is not dying, but the Lear whom he acts is dying, dying, dying. The body fact is life; the body act is death. That enormous tension between the two states is real, is true. The general semanticist who said that the word *death* is meaningless because it cannot be understood until it is experienced, and then it cannot be explained, was talking through his hat. Literature makes possible the experiencing of the inexpressible. Hermione had no words for Leontes, but Shakespeare makes us understand what lay behind her silence. If students of communication are not interested in Shakespeare's achievement, I must feel great sorrow for them. We want our speech to be clear and direct, but—to quote Anthony Brandt once again, "one simplifies one's speech only by recognizing and coming to terms with its inescapable complexity. . . ."

Ultimately, the great writer uncovers for us the deepest springs of our own experience, makes manifest in language and in symbolic action experiences we could never otherwise explore or endure, extends our horizons and stretches our spirits, gives words to words and spurs to thoughts. The writer is a man who communes with the world in which he lives and communicates to us that unique act of communion in which he engages. There are great writers and there are not so great writers. There is nothing about writing which magically bestows virtue upon the writer. Some writing is not worth our time; some is worth all we can give to it. In literature, as in life, as in communication theory, as in rhetoric, as in the media, as in forensics, as in all the other activities to which we devote ourselves in this profession, there are values. Literature is no different from life in this respect; we must make choices in the things to which we devote our time—and sure, some of us in theatre and

interpretation devote time to things perhaps not worth it. I don't value the inept writer any more than I value the inept anything else. But I value the great writer more than I value most others because from my own point of view he tells me most—and most effectively—about the way human beings speak and behave. He does it through that marvellous instrument by way of which men and women share, with people whom they may never meet, the truths of experience. Much is to be said of non-verbal communication, and I am delighted that in this Association we are devoting much of our time to exploring its values, though we find ironically that in exploring it we usually talk about it. Much is to be said of the arts of painting and music and dance and sculpture, each of which has its own enduring human values to express. But surely it is true that our language and our speech offer us our strongest ties with our world, our uniquely human ties. To those who explore them most fully, we owe great thanks. Surely to be proud of being human—when we are able to be proud of that—ought to make us proud of those who speak most capably to and for us. The reduction of our language to the kind of jargon which infects the tongues of most of us too much of the time is no tribute to our capacities as men and women. If it seems worthwhile to be useful, to share, to respond, to inquire, to think, to feel—if it seems worthwhile to do these things, surely it should be worthwhile to increase, in whatever measure possible for each of us, the skill of the tongue which speaks and the language which lives upon that tongue. In this endeavor, poetry seems to me still the best teacher. There may be no seacoast in Bohemia, but Shakespeare's Bohemia has a seacoast. Ben Jonson was right, but Shakespeare is not wrong.

Two weeks ago, a white Boeing 707 bearing Egyptian President Anwar Sadat landed at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. On whatever side of the Middle East argument one may stand, that moment must have seemed to almost anyone among the most moving moments of recent history, bearing as it did upon the hopes and fears of millions of people. It is interesting that in seeking to report it, in seeking to put into language the depth of the moment's feeling, *Time* magazine chose to cite a passage from literature. Whether one sees the Bible as revelation or as literature, it is clear enough that *Genesis* did not speak first in the English language in which *Time* cited it. Referring to a belief that the Edomites may be the forebears of today's Arabs, *Time* says:

Some religious Jews even said the Sadat-Begin meeting foreshadowed in the Torah text for the Sabbath . . . read at prayer services for that Saturday morning. It was a passage from *Genesis* describing the reconciliation of Jacob and his brother Esau, who fathered the Edomites. . . . A key passage from the reading: "Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold

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Esau came . . . and Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept."¹

Literature lives through time, in time. It must be read both synchronically and diachronically. The *Time* report makes the most of the juncture of those two kinds of reading. For the moment, it brings the Bible to new life.

In the context of our own lives, this is what we always do with literature. Its truth is always in some part its truth to us. Men die, but their words may live. If we are interested, as we say, in communication, can we really believe that the living words of those long dead are of no real use to the living? That they are the toys of interpreters and actors and other perhaps well-meaning but lightheaded individuals? Or of the benighted rhetorician who still has some taste left for style? We do rather badly by eloquence, in our Association.

Literature has plenty of truth in it, for us. In literature, language is used at its most human levels, in the exploration of the most human gestures. Surely to *this* kind of truth, too, we should encourage ourselves to listen. Let literature talk; let us listen. Even if it's to the sea rolling in on the seacoast of Bohemia.

—Wallace A. Bacon
Northwestern University

NOTES

¹*Ben Jonson's Literary Criticism*, ed. James D. Redwine, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 170. The subsequent comment on the seacoast of Bohemia is on p. 173. (The volume is one in the Regents Critics Series issued by the press.)

²Sidney's remarks are in the *Apologie for Poetrie*, and are here cited from Charles Kaplan, ed., *Criticism: Twenty Major Statements* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, n.d.), pp. 104-142.

³James's comments are from *The Art of Fiction* (1884), cited from Kaplan, op. cit., pp. 422-439. Subsequent comments are from the same essay.

⁴Luncheon address at WSCA: "An Umbrella for Three: the Unity of SCA," November 22, 1977.

⁵Anthony Brandt, "Lies, Lies, Lies," *The Atlantic*, November, 1977, pp. 58-63. The passage cited is on p. 62.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Time*, November 28, 1977, p. 28.

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