

The Pure and the Good: On Baseball and Backpacking

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ADE Bulletin 61 (May 1979), pp. 3–5

ISSN: 0001-0898

CrossRef DOI: 10.1632/ade.61.3

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reading imaginative literature can be the crystallizing occasions when those qualities come within a young person's reach.

Literal-minded parents and taxpayers, not realizing what it can mean for a student to encounter an author's total vision of life, often demand that we teach only books falling within a narrow band of decorum and discretion. We are all accustomed to defending outwardly "negative" literature against would-be censors. Ironically, the Babbitts have now been joined by the mandarins of criticism in proclaiming that great books are either subversive or meaningless or both. Both camps are mistaken, but on at least three counts the Babbitts are less foolish: they know that activities such as reading and teaching literature require a justification; they express *their* distrust of literature without recourse to the catchphrases of Parisian intellectual gamesmanship; and above all, their arguments do not undermine their own professional *raison d'être*.

Since reasoning with our new revolutionaries of

the word is plainly futile, I address my modest proposal to the rest of us. Let us recall our own best experience as readers when we try to explain, so many years after our adolescence, why we still find it rewarding to live in the presence of great books. By now, to be sure, we may be reading little besides student papers, committee reports, and government forms. But we can scarcely lay that complaint at the door of literature. Whatever compromises we have had to make with bureaucracy, however distant our early enthusiasms may seem, we know that literature has sustained us. And we know that it can still do the same for others, if only we refrain from selling it short.

NOTE

¹Hayden White, "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory," *Contemporary Literature*, 17 (Summer 1976), 379.

THE PURE AND THE GOOD: ON BASEBALL AND BACKPACKING

I MUST have been a little confused when I agreed to talk on this subject, "The Pure Good of Literature." A member of the ADE Executive Committee that planned the program, no less a person than Arthur Coffin, asked me whether I would as I was walking to the platform to talk to his students at Montana State University in Bozeman. "Pure" and "good" are words that don't come through to me clearly at normal altitudes, but Bozeman is such a beautiful town, with the Spanish Peaks behind it and the Bridger Mountains in front, that the pure and the good seem possible there, so I said yes, and went on to the platform to talk about something very different.

Next morning, though, I was troubled enough to look Arthur up before leaving the Gallatin Valley to ask whether I had heard him right, and he repeated himself in daylight and went on to say that maybe I didn't know but since I had retired from teaching there had been a steady decline in the enrollment of students in English. He stated this in such a way as to suggest some relation of cause and effect, so I remained sufficiently confused to be here this morning to speak, in New York of all places, about the pure and the good.

There isn't a chance, though, I will say anything

timely to affect the job market. I began teaching in 1928 during the Great Boom but just before the Great Depression and, although I always had a job during the Depression, I never once in all those years got a raise in rank or salary. So I have taught in good times and bad times, without greatly affecting the economy.

Something tells me that this may be true of many of us. All we can do at any given time is to teach what we see as best in literature and, I may add, in ourselves. It is also true, however, that in literature, as in life, we may come to take things for granted when times are good, or may do the opposite—through affluence, get fancy and lose sight of the fundamentals in a sea of aesthetics. In either event, it probably makes sense to take a fresh look at ourselves when things are not good to be sure we are

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at our best.

For instance, it pays from time to time to see whether, as teachers, scholars, and critics of literature, we are as good as professional baseball writers or even as baseball fans. Baseball fans are among our leading exponents of the art-for-art's-sake school of criticism—to them the art of baseball is a thing in itself and sufficient unto itself. They love it deeply and are very learned about it. The difference between a double steal and a delayed steal is primer stuff to them, and, as critics, they all know it is a disfigurement of the art to try a steal of any kind when your team is three or four runs behind. They know what they are talking about, and they are willing to stand up all night to get a ticket to see the big game. I have just written a small book of stories that was widely enough reviewed to entitle me to the opinion that a fair number of professional literary critics don't even know what kinds of questions to ask about a book. There are people in the grandstands of our profession who wouldn't be allowed in the bleachers of baseball. And many of our students in poetry can't tell an anapest from third base.

I am old-fashioned. I believe that one must know something about craftsmanship to come to know and love an art in its purity. We just must assume that one of our greatest loves is of the things men and women make with their hands and hearts and heads. We must assume that some of those beautiful things are hard to make and that therefore it will probably be hard to know as much as we should about an art in order to love it as we should. Even the ordinary baseball fan operates on these assumptions.

But many of our students in poetry courses—even in graduate courses—can do nothing, for instance, with the rhythm of poems. Reading a poem to them is like going to the senior prom and not being able to dance. But they have to know some things about craft before they can see and feel some of the complex beauty that has given immortality to such a seemingly simple old ballad as "Lord Randal." To see its beauty they must see that part of it is in its complex rhythm and in the suitability of its rhythm to a musical form such as the ballad, and in particular to "Lord Randal." At the end, they should be able to write a paper showing that it has at least three rhythms superimposed on its base English accentual rhythm of falling-rising syllables—carefully varied iambs and anapests—as "O where hae ye been, Lord Randal, my son." But they should be able to go on from there and show that the music only begins with qualitative rhythm, that quantitative rhythm is concurrent with the qualitative, that above the patterned syllables are larger verbal units of half lines and whole lines falling into patterns, as in Hebrew verse, and that the four-line stanza itself eventually becomes a foot, with the first two lines being a question and

the last two lines the answer. This patterned repetition of grammatical structure we might call grammatical rhythm, and with it comes another kind of rhythm, a patterned recurrence of pitch or key, the question asked in the first two lines by the anxious mother in a high female key and the answer in the last two lines in the low masculine tones of her dying son.

So in this old-time immortal ballad there are at least four rhythms harmonizing with one another: the qualitative patterned recurrence of stressed syllables; the quantitative rhythm of recurring half lines, whole lines, and four-line stanzas; the repeated grammatical structures within these quantitative units; and finally a patterned change of key within each stanza from high key in the first two lines to low key in the last two.

"O where hae ye been, Lord Randal, my son?"

O where hae ye been, my handsome young man?"

"I hae been to the wild wood; mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

"Where gat ye your dinner, Lord Randal, my son?"

Where gat ye your dinner, my handsome young man?"

"I din'd wi' my true-love; mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

Such a lovely old poem, forever fresh and forever carrying with it its own musical accompaniment.

Let us leave the baseball fans behind in the bleachers. Ultimately, of course, literature does not play a game unless it is the game of life, and life is impure—it flops around and has spasms and in between it runs too straight, routinized by jobs and families and what the neighbors think. What then can be pure or good about it?

From here on I speak for myself, while hoping I speak for others. As I look back at my life now that I have been allowed to pass considerably beyond my biblical allotment of three score years and ten, I find times when it lifted itself out of its impurities of spasms and routines and became, usually briefly, as if shaped by a poet or storyteller. When the time was short and intense, like one of Wordsworth's "Spots of Time," it became, alas for a moment only, a lyric poem. If it went on through time and took in characters and events, it became a story. Now, looking back at my life, I see it largely as a sheaf of unarranged poems and stories with a few threads binding them together. I don't remember much of what happened in between. What I remember most about my life is its literature.

I don't want at my age to go metaphysical, but I doubt that there are, outside us in *X*, assortments of ready-made poems and stories and that we just happen along and find roles in them. It takes a poet and a storyteller to make a poem and a story. Even if such literary works are lying ready-made outside us in

X, it takes a poet and a storyteller to recognize them when they come along.

As perhaps several of you know, I turned to writing stories of my own life to fill a gap left by my retirement and the death of my wife. I had the good fortune of having been brought up in the early part of this century in the woods of western Montana and of not having to go to school until I was nearly eleven. My collection of stories is called *A River Runs through It*, and they are love stories: stories of my love of craft—of what men and women can do with their hands—and of my love of seeing life turn into literature.

The reaction to these stories suggests that at times I may have succeeded. One of the stories, entitled “USFS 1919,” is about my third summer in the early United States Forest Service, when I was seventeen years old, but older than the Forest Service. It is, if anything, overloaded with the excitement of learning how to do things in the woods of northern Idaho and how it feels to do them, of how, for instance, to fight forest fires and how it feels when the heat is so great that the only oxygen left is less than fourteen inches from the ground. But now in my hometown of Missoula, Montana, I am something of a hero to the big-legged boys and girls who are backpackers—they stop to congratulate me because an excerpt from this story was published in the *Backpacking Journal*. The excerpt contains a brief sketch of the history of the art of packing horses, mules, and camels—of its

origins in Asia, its travels across Africa and from there by way of the Arabs to Spain, where it picked up much of its present terminology (such as *manty* and the *cinch* of a saddle), and from Spain to Mexico and from Mexico to squaws and from squaws to us. To the big-legged boys and girls of my hometown, no greater honor can befall a living writer than to have something published in the *Backpacking Journal*, especially if it tells how to throw a diamond hitch.

But I have had several letters about this story from some girls from Brooklyn that pleased me even more. The overall plot of my Forest Service story is that of a boy in the woods who for the first time sees his life turning into a story, and the girls from Brooklyn, where supposedly one tree grows, wrote to tell me that they liked my story of the boy in the Forest Service in northern Idaho in 1919 because that very summer (1976) the same thing had happened to them—for the first time ever they had seen their own lives turn into a story. I don’t know what had happened to them—perhaps they had fallen in love with some boy in a summer camp in upstate New York—but what was even more important to them is that for the first time they had seen their lives have a complication and a purgation.

No doubt, much of their power to make such an observation is genetic, but I am sure some of it can be taught. If I did not think so, I would not have spent fifty years of my life trying to teach literature, in good times and in bad times.

WHY I HAVE LIKED TO READ POETRY— DESPITE SOME ENGLISH TEACHERS I HAVE KNOWN

AS I prepared this presentation, the title of this program—“The Pure Good of Literature”—flickered in my thoughts as chimerically as a snow-battered Midwesterner’s hopes for spring. Aging in an imperfect world, I no longer speak serenely of the *pure good* of literature or of other ideals that I dreamed in days not so long ago. To prepare an honest presentation, I focused instead on the specific charge in my invitation, “If you can speak, your assignment would be to explain why you read poetry. Obviously your talk might be autobiographical.”

Even with this new focus, I reacted ambivalently. Despite my sympathetic appreciation of the intention of the program, the wording of the invitation caused me to wonder whether the Coordinator suspected that he was asking me to participate in an episode of *Mission: Impossible*. Years ago, I decided that, in-

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stead of extolling the abstract virtues of literature to skeptical students who, having heard the sales pitch before, judged me more suspiciously than the newest salesman on the local used-car lot, I would teach works that I enjoyed or had enjoyed. I hoped that, if my students had begun to accept me as a normal human being, some of them might empathize with my responses or might be enticed to discover whether

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Backpacking is a very loose definition. There are backpackers who go tramping in the forests sleeping in tents and on the beach, and hitchhike their way around the world. And there are those who backpack with roller-bag suitcases, sleep in hotels and rent a car to get around a country. These are two completely different types of traveling, but they both like to call themselves backpackers. Final Thoughts on Best Backpacking Sleeping Bags. Quick Answer: These are the Best Backpacking Sleeping Bags. Feathered Friends Swift 20 YF â€” Top Pick for Best Backpacking Sleeping Bag. Sea to Summit Spark â€” Best Ultralight Sleeping Bag for Hikers.Â A good quality sleeping bag isnâ€™t going to be cheap; however, look at your sleeping bag as an investment. Many of the sleeping bags on our list come with lifetime warranties, and you can expect them to last for decades. Moreover, I think it is worth investing in a lightweight and packable sleeping bag if you want to keep your overall backpack light so as to avoid straining your back. Iâ€™ve listed a couple of backpacker-friendly sleeping bags from the store REI (USA).