

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE SHAPING OF WORLD THOUGHT

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Source: *CLA Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (December, 1966), pp. 91-104

Published by: College Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44328121>

Accessed: 01-11-2020 20:19 UTC

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JOURNAL

Official Publication of The College Language Association

VOLUME X

DECEMBER, 1966

NUMBER 2

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE
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By MILTON G. HARDIMAN

I approach now the duty imposed upon me by the tradition of the office—that of making a Presidential Address. This being my first year in the presidential chair, and although I have heard and read several presidential addresses, this is a painful experience for me because, essentially, I am not a writer.

There is some compensation in having the mantle of authority figuratively draped over my shoulders, however, and in being known as the President of this Association. I don't deny that, at least, I am thought of with a little more consideration among my colleagues at the school where I work, with a bit of awe in the community which I serve, and with just a bit more of respect at home where I am not the king. My only solace with respect to you of the Association is that I did not solicit the job in any way. Thus, I can ask your forgiveness for my shortcomings in the discharge of my duties.

In consideration of the subject before us for the theme of

¹ President's address delivered at The College Language Association's Twenty-Sixth Annual Conference, Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia, Thursday morning, April 28, 1966.

this Conference, we can think of many areas of informational control which have affected the mental forces of man and of the resulting influences which have come to direct the forces of mankind. Throughout the ages the masses of humanity, so often unassuming in character and inert in positive action for good on their own—for they tend to be mobs when they do act in concert rather than thinking groups—have been subjected to the thought controls emanating from various composites of life or from one or another individual from within these composites.

There is no question about the fact that we in the realm of education have molded, or attempted to mold, the minds of humanity since the time that the first school was opened. I'll admit that sometimes it has been a one-way proposition and at other times a contest of "the survival of the fittest," but despite these difficulties alluded to above, we of the underprivileged professionals can lay claim to the fact that we have had some part in their intellectual discipline which indirectly has contributed more or less to world thought. Well, why be naive about it, and why not state it firmly and unabashedly? We in education have forged an intellectual grip on the thinking world that can be challenged by no other informational area of control.

One of the most powerful forces which competes and has competed for a part in the shaping of the mind of humanity is the world press. Of course, this is a modern implement and in no way harks back to the beginning of civilization when men, draped in animal skins, sat hunched over their flat rock slabs, painfully "hacking out" their latest edition of the late stone newspaper. The modern newspaper plants, with their jet-speed presses and with their ever-increasing pieces of invention, stand as wonderful monuments in the technological advancement of man in his quest for control by way of his dissemination of information. Still more marvelous are the non-automatic operators within these great, gigantic plants, especially those of administrative level who determine the policy of what does and what doesn't go forth for public consumption. Back of their decisions lies the thought of enormous economic profits and perhaps even more—if we can imagine such in this materialistic world—the idea of national superiority in the theatre of

world events. Therefore, they not only direct and determine the funneling of simple journalistic information but they also alter, color and shape certain portions of this material so that they may have a critical bearing on the political, economical and social aspects of international intercourse. There can be no denial that this area of man's productive capacity wields an uncommon and not surprising influence on the unfolding of creative thought.

Needless to say, we have not exhausted the composites of control in man's pursuit of persuasiveness and in his manipulation of ideologies, but we have called your attention to the principal areas which have been brought to bear to accomplish these ends. In each case, we have confined ourselves to those which make use of language or a type of writing to project their creative thinking upon a world public. This list would include only those which man has used for a century or more and which have made their impact upon civilizations and whose impact can be measured or assessed to a certain extent. Therefore, television would be excluded even though its material might approximate indirectly that of the other areas of journalism and so of other communications.

The theme of our conference for this year seems rather large in scope, and indeed it is. But we do not intend that it shall encompass the whole gamut of the meaning of language and literature which might be read into a broad connotation of the terms. It is my idea, and I believe that of the others who helped to select the subject, that we shall not be concerned with the contemplation of language simply as a tool but with language as a sensitive vehicle and dispenser of ideas; that, of the many facets of literature, we are not faced here with the matter of aesthetics or sensitized developments of emotional concepts but we hope to deal with literature as a matter of dynamics. In other words, it is our hope that the individuals who address this conference and discuss this theme will discover and point out the extent to which these two basic components have been used by their craftsmen to introduce their pregnant ideas and philosophies.

I myself shall not attempt a thorough research project or a scientific treatise of any sort on this subject. Suffice it to say that, if given the time, one could produce a thesis of interesting

content and value and of such magnitude that the material would have to be covered in volumes to direct attention to what men of letters have done on a general basis over the centuries and what are some of the possibilities for the future.

Addressing himself to the forthcoming Nineteenth University of Kentucky Foreign Language Conference at Lexington, Kentucky, which is meeting at this same time, John W. Oswald, President of that University, wrote for the front page of the program folder, the following:

As the world shrinks, as tension between nations mounts, it is imperative that we seek to improve communications and to promote understanding through fostering language learning at all levels of education, through intensified examination of the literatures of the world, through ever deeper inquiries into the very nature of language. Your deliberations on all phases of language study from pedagogy and linguistics to the analysis of literature, contribute directly to the understanding of other peoples and of mankind itself.

And for fear that you of the area of English may be miffed and feel "left out" in my selecting this comment from a conference on foreign languages, I say to you not to feel slighted for you yourselves, in many cases, are teaching a foreign language too—and I don't mean to foreigners.

It is in the realm of professional literary endeavor that the construction of world thinking has been most evident. For it is here among these artisans where man in his freest professional state has dared, sometimes forthright, sometimes in subtle ways, to challenge the powers of control in whatever line of activity. The writer has had with him a most powerful weapon—his words—no sword, no pike, no spear, no guns strapped to his sides. He certainly has not had at his disposal any of the modern missiles—atomic or hydrogen bombs—but what a noise he has made with the essence of the material dripping from his pen, generation after generation. What influences he has wielded throughout the civilizations of the world in the greatest arenas of all ages—in the minds of men.

From the beginning of the time when men yearned to exchange information with one another, they soon made feeble efforts toward the communication of ideas. Various early civilizations had their primitive offerings which were feeble attempts

even at those early stages to peer at the more intimate activities of the human race and to analyze creatively its habits with a view toward directing these findings in certain prescribed channels.

Gradually, these processes evolved until these writers began to note that the products of their works had a sort of magic quality of welding a kind of mass thinking and they now began to realize that there was for them contained therein an unleashed power greater than any force of arms.

Before this time, men were bound by tradition in life to endure the hardships and difficulties imposed upon them by a hard-cruled cult of more or less self-imposed power—an unyielding society—a small circle of persons who maintained their positions by brute force. However, when the first stone sheet was hacked from the quarry and placed, engraved with communicating characters, before a credulous public, this brute power began to slip for the very first time. The stone was replaced by bark or skins of animals, which were later supplemented by a substance made from the seaweed. Many other materials were used until the discovery of the modern-day newsprint. The use of easier writing materials facilitated the rise in the production of books and other products of communication, the number of writers increased, the flow of ideas was multiplied, systems of philosophies began to appear, and the shackles on the masses of mankind began to loosen more and more. This evolution of thought leads gradually into a deeper penetration of the processes of society and into the psychology of individual action. The discoveries of new worlds open up new vistas of penetration and bring on international creativity of ideas competing for dominant position in the world. Men now do battle—with words.

The out-put of powerful and creative literary works has not been a one-man activity, has not been that of one group or that of one society, or that of one race or of one nation; it has been a universal production. No one nation or group has ever been able to monopolize the attention of the world with its literary creations except during stated periods. Thinking men are present in every society of any race in every nation, even in the most primitive, if given a chance to think. And men have never remained mentally shackled forever; for, as I have

intimated above, if God chooses not to shackle the minds of men, man cannot clamp the fetters of ignorance on a thinking portion of humanity for too long a time.

The responsible languages and literatures of the world have been prominent through many ages. No one will deny the influence of the language and literature of ancient Rome and that of ancient Greece, which even had their golden eras. But what about the literatures of the Egyptian civilization and of the Chaldean period? Haven't they had some importance? Were not the Chroniclers of the Babylonian era of importance too? And although there has been some controversy about the Bible as literature, is there not enough unanimity now that, at least, portions of the Bible constitute some of the finest literature emanating from the Judeo-Christian era? And after all, the significance of the subject is that we are placing emphasis on the weight of creative writing on world opinion.

Shall we mention Sanskrit the literary language of the Hindus which dates back 2,000 years serving as the means of learned intercourse and composition? Or can we by-pass Chinese literature, one of the most voluminous of all literatures, the language of which is probably the oldest written language used by man and whose national history can be traced back almost 5,000 years. Or Japanese literature, whose rise to prominence is most recent, but interestingly enough, some of whose best literature dating from the tenth Century is the work of women in that country.

The Persian language belonging to the great Indo-European family has provided a literature from which may be mentioned Zoroaster, the prophet and lawgiver of ancient Persia and whose doctrines are contained in the ancient sacred books of Persia collected under the name of Zend-Avesta.

When we approach the languages and literatures of the more modern world, the case which, evidently, we are pursuing becomes stronger and much more evident. The facilities for writing and for printing were and are much more prevalent, and man's intent to be free of constant domination begets the writer and his cause. The penalties for expressing one's thoughts, ideas, and philosophies gradually grew less severe and the writers dared to challenge the purposes and policies and even the power of the authorities who, heretofore, had to be lulled

or deluded with a deftly woven fabric of composition liberally adulterated with blandishments for those in power. The writer begins to have a power of his own.

And so we come to the more modern era of literary production with such a national language as that of Italy which was the result of the natural development of the popular Latin and whose literature is unique in that there is within it no old Italian as distinct from the modern. The language of the recognized master continues to be that of the modern writers. The memory of Rome during the Dark Ages sparked the Italians to keep alive a spirit of freedom unknown in the other countries of Europe and, while the other literatures had their origin in the legends of the Bible and of Chivalry, the Italian Literature found its source of inspiration in the study of the highlights of the Roman civilization.

Of course, no consideration of languages and literatures could be complete in any respect without alluding to the great dominance of the country of France in the vistas of world thought. Even if we are naive enough to be "hooked" by the attempts in our own country to debunk the image of M. le président De Gaule and, consequently, the image of France in world affairs, no one is able to minimize the preponderance and importance of the French language and its literature, the product of the French analytical mind. And although many of the representatives of other languages might resent the inference, we possibly could say that the crux of our discussions rests here with these writers—those of France. It was no mere accident that the educational, technical, cultural and diplomatic language of the world was for almost two centuries that of France. Its pre-eminent men of letters—along with a few women—have been the *cause célèbre*. I am sure you remember that, in England, about the time that Chaucer was born in 1340, French was still the language of the courts of law, of diplomacy and of the king and his counselors, and Chaucer was twenty-two years old before English became the official language of parliament. Only recently has the English language supplanted the French—and that, not because of literary distinction but because of the material power of the United States and the lust of the world for material gain.

If we made no mention of any other writers except those of

the 18th century of France, we could present a strong argument for our case. The already weakening structure of empirical domination of men's minds and bodies and the unholy grasp of political domination of governments and societies is placed in almost collapsible condition beneath the verbal onslaughts issuing from the pens of these authors. They are writers whose words are heard as loudly as the thunder claps on a still summer day.

One country whose literature has been grossly neglected until recent day is that of Spain. That may be explained in part because the nation had, over its centuries of existence, so many different conquerors and by its own political convulsions, of which it has been a victim for so long. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, in various periods, the very struggles of the Christian Spaniards against their infidel aggressors have given rise to a literature which of necessity had to wage a fierce combat to command attention.

If it were not for political changes in the present day, we might not even consider Russian language and literature, but the exigencies of the time have brought about a change in thinking. And yet the great writers in France and England and in other countries were highly influenced by writers from Russia with help from the courts of Catherine II and Peter the Great, who laid the cornerstone of a national literature by raising the Russian dialect to the dignity of a written language. The literature of these people, although slow to produce a far-reaching power upon themselves, has had profound effect upon people and literatures of other nations. And *Dr. Zhivago* produced more than a ripple of attention in the nation itself.

And what about the German language and literature? The literature of such a warlike people who, since their early invasions, have struck such terror in the hearts of people with whom they have come in contact. If we made no mention of any literary work of the nation other than the *Reformation* of Luther, we could substantiate a great part of the discussion. However, who would omit mention of the great German philosophers, Lessing, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller, under whose influence, according to Rascoe in *Titans of Literature*, "German literature lost its exclusive and sectional character and became cosmopolitan and universal."

In mentioning the language and literature of England, one immediately finds material of every sort to bring to bear for discussion. Perhaps only France can be pointed to, as a challenger in output and importance because the names of its writers of every genre are legend. In theology, in philosophy, in political economy, in history, as well as in those areas of the aesthetic arts, no nation can lay claim to any greater contributions toward molding universal thought than those of England. Its outstanding men of letters have produced monuments whose importance has not diminished in character and in proportion with time and whose luster and brilliance have not lessened with the changes and complexities of modern society.

Last, but not least, to be mentioned in this listing of nations whose writers have had a prominent hand in shaping universal thinking is the United States, the most important of the younger countries. Young, vigorous, restless, enterprising, tough—until the present—methodical, technologically strong, the nation has produced writers of the Colonial period whose products have brought admiration from many countries. Writers of the Civil War period have had profound effect upon the nation itself as well as upon other areas of world thinking. Of course, time must elapse to enable a comparable evaluation of the writings of this young nation.

If I have omitted mention of the works and writers of other nations, I have done so because it would be impossible in this short paper to list all of them. I have tried to mention only those which have commanded the attention of scholars and others of cultural understanding over a period of years. I do not deny that conscious efforts are being made every day to discover new materials from new areas of the world.

Having surveyed lightly and rapidly the field of literatures wedded closely with languages which have influenced world opinion, might we pass rapidly over the world-wide, recognized list of persons who have loomed large upon the vista-screen of criticism for such luminaries. These would be the towering giants of literature who, in the rapidly changing eras of literary history and amidst the periods of political upheaval and social evolution and revolution, have survived the test of time and remain permanently etched in the minds of responsible and acknowledged critics of the world.

Throughout the period of written history, men have sung the praises of Homer of Greek legend and Sophocles of Greek drama and Socrates and Plato of philosophy. In Latin literature, it has been Virgil and his monumental works plus consideration of Horace who "is incredibly underestimated" by the classical scholars, not to mention Cicero, the political orator of unwelcome fame for so many school kids of several years ago. In the modern era it is Dante who enriches the Medieval mind and Boccaccio who enlivens existence in the period of the Renaissance. In France—in early years—it is Rabelais, whose seemingly irreverent gusto is a sort of mask to hide his irritation at the hypocrisy of his time; Villon whose total production is very meager but whose poetry is provocative: These two, along with Montaigne could "be said to have formed the French mind," again as quoted by Rascoe.

The *immortal* Don Quixote has projected Cervantes into an *immortal* position among the great lights in creative literature.

And it is a paradox of intellectual concern that there seems to be much more evidence of a living and breathing Chaucer in early English literature than there is of Shakespeare whom everybody knows about but whom nobody is sure about, and whose life is still somewhat legendary. John Milton's place in the literary sun is perpetuated, at least here in America, by the fact that most persons who have ever gone to school have had to memorize portions of *Paradise Lost*.

It is the indefatigable Voltaire of French literature who is remembered for his earth shaking political and philosophical criticisms but who would rather have been remembered as superior to Shakespeare. Goethe took sixty years to write *Faust* but this alone, if nothing more, made him famous. Lord Byron was responsible for inspiring Goethe and many romantic poets in Germany and France by his boldness, passion and pessimism.

In the 19th Century a new genius disturbed and shook the French literary world with the production of his *Hernani*. Victor Hugo introduced the romantic revolt which was to free the literatures of the classical vise and his genius was to present a significant symbol of humanitarianism hitherto undreamed of. During this era came also Verlaine who produced an inimitable poetry of fervor, tenderness and soul. During this time

there appears also another Frenchman, Gustave Flaubert of whom Rascoe says that he sought "with infinite pains and much travail of soul for the precise word which would render a scene with such exactitude to reality that even God would approve of its fidelity."

How can one omit mention, in this list, of Dickens, of gigantic imagination or Shelley, the poet of affection? Or of Edgar Allan Poe of American fame, author of the fabled *Raven* or Robert Louis Stevenson and his *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* or Walt Whitman, the poetical prophet of democracy? And why could we not mention also Paul Laurence Dunbar whose poems of dialect are of such penetrating vibrancy or the powerful and sharp-pointed observations of W. E. B. Dubois?

Before concluding the survey and lest we take the chance of being classed as politically prejudiced, two outstanding Russian writers should receive some recognition: Dostoievski, whose morbid novels stirred up revolt against the feudal conditions of autocratic Russia and who was known as the prose-poet of the sufferings and aspirations of the Russian common people; the other Leo Tolstoi, the master story teller, the novelist of *War and Peace*, who paints the picture of a whole epoch in a single novel.

It is obvious that the above list of writers is arbitrary and in no wise complete. It is merely an attempt to point out a few of the great literary craftsmen who have proved that the literatures of the great languages of the world have been and are being potent forces in world thinking. There appears to be no doubt that the creative professional writers throughout history have left their indelible imprint on world ideas and philosophies; and yet, with comparatively few exceptions, they have not participated actively in the direction and culmination of these ideas, that is, they are, so to speak, the ghost writers for society's administrators. That may well be for, perhaps, the giants of literature are too idealistic for the practical application of their philosophical propositions.

Writers, with full knowledge of their power in words, ought to tackle more forcibly in novels, in drama, in poetry, in philosophical disquisitions, in every possible branch of literature the problems of world society. Hugo proclaimed that the poet must express the ideas of his time.

If I were a writer, I would take a hard look at some of the pressing problems into which present day society seems to be wallowing or, at least, with which it seems to be grappling. For example, if I were a writer, as a citizen of the country, *I might* in some dramatic way address myself to the question of the involvement in the Vietnamese war. There is such a muddle of understanding or misunderstanding about the issues involved that writers of note should probe as far as possible for the true facts which seem to be buried in a mass of studied and distorted interests in which the uninformed citizens find themselves the victims.

Or I might delve into the question of the survival of Negro Colleges in this integrating and integrated society. For it seems evident to me that, with 20 million Negroes, more or less, in this country, there must be a continuing educative process on the part of institutions whose faculties understand their constituents more closely and whose facilities are, for the most part, deep within the reach of the masses whom they serve. I know I chance the ire of those who would abolish any vestige of reason for sustaining such a program, but I am confirmed in my belief that the agency which has done the job over the years, against insuperable odds, is still the best equipped to share the job now that changes have been effectuated to eliminate these insuperable odds.

If I were a writer, I might feel it my responsibility as a citizen to call attention in some dramatic manner to the shocking disregard of questions of national interest on the part of big business, which, especially, indulges in all kinds of practices to grab the big money receipts: The deceit in advertising by television and newspaper; the blatant disregard for truth in offering packaged products; the unscrupulous maneuvering of industry to swallow up every possible competitive avenue; and the completely callous lack of consideration for using any means of public display to play on the carnal appetites of young and old merely to compete for and boast of billion dollar sales.

If I had the gift of words for the printed page, I might feel constrained to contrive some type of literary discourse with reference to the Civil Rights struggle, so hectic, so controversial, so far-reaching in world interest and so vital to the future of

the Negro in America—and to America herself. I might make a dramatic appeal to this newly recognized citizen to continue moving forward but with sureness of action and program so as to preserve the image with which he began the struggle.

Might I refer you to an excerpt taken from a paper read at our conference last year by Sylvia Lyons Render. She quotes a passage written by Charles W. Chesnutt in his *Journal II*, dated May 8, 1880:

The Negro's part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; *and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it*—to accustom the public mind to the idea; and while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously, to the desired state of feeling. If I can do anything to further this work, and can see any likelihood of obtaining success in it, I would gladly devote my life to the work.²

I would say to him that whatever he does he must remember that the future of the country is of prime importance, not just the future of race, and that with opportunity also comes the responsibility to share reflective and responsible action. I would say to him that the avenue of information which, formerly and almost exclusively in the beginning of the struggle, pictured openly the mean, disgusting and bigoted actions of the majority race as displayed on the streets and in the group gatherings are now beginning to reverse the procedure and show the crude, violent and uncontrolled tantrums of this newly recognized race. I would say that the mature and sober image of the new Negro beamed across the country and over the airways of the world in the March on Washington is the *best way* to convince the skeptics and the vested powers that this new citizen is determined to take his place in the stream of affairs.

And lastly, if I were a writer, I would have to dramatize in some way, perhaps in novel or poem, the almost inhuman way which we have of disrespecting the memory of the heroes of the nation, the memory of important national anniversaries, and especially the memory of persons in the armed services who have sacrificed themselves on the field of battle.

I would have to say that the debunking of our national heroes and the causes which they upheld is something of a blot on our

² *CLA Journal*, IX (September, 1965), 41. Italics are mine.

intelligence and a crack in our national armor. Any nation which forgets its traditions, the causes or events which spawned or preserved it will soon be a candidate for decline and fall. And if I were a G. I. Joe, past or present, and surely, if I had paid the supreme sacrifice, I would have to ask God to excuse me for cursing while I watched, from above, the hordes of people who, on the few memorial days observed, head for the recreational resorts, the golf courses, the picnic grounds, the ball games, etc., with hardly a thought of the ones who made it possible for them to be free to participate in such activities.

If I seem to be moralizing, I call attention again to the theme of our Conference which seems to infer that many who have essayed the role of literature have been responsible for helping to create a public forum for the development of world issues. Let me point out a paragraph which I recently read from a folder for a conference on continuing education at Notre Dame University:

The continuing explosion of new knowledge combined with the unprecedented rate of change currently taking place in our society is forcing mature people to reappraise seriously their understanding of and responsibility for the social, scientific, business, political and religious forces at work in the world.

To conclude, let me reiterate that the writer of literature has always been a potent factor in world discussion and debate. He has a power which is undeniable. To gain recognition and to win on these fields of action, he has a weapon very unique in character but as old as written history itself. His instrument is so powerful that, unlike the instruments of war, it is the instrument of the press and all other journalistic endeavor. It is the printed word.

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