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LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LIFE[1]

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As the President of the College Language Association, and since this is the second and last year of my incumbency, it becomes my duty to " sing my swan song " with respect to the direction of that office. It has been a pleasure for me to be entrusted with the top office of the administration; my only regret is that I have not had the time necessary to carry out properly and effectively the duties appertaining thereto. Almost immediately after my nomination and election to office (and almost anybody, if he tells the truth, relishes the thought of having the opportunity to serve as the highest administrative officer of any organization), I was appointed to one of the top administrative positions at the University where I work. Again I say, we relish these positions too, but these appointments carry responsibilities which demand many hours of planning and working time; and, of course, because of their conjunction with our livelihood, cannot be neglected. I must admit, therefore, although I have worked hard for CLA, the appointment referred to did handicap, to some extent, the possibilities for a better performance in this office.

[1] President's address delivered at The College Language Association's Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention, Virginia State College, Petersburg, Virginia, Thursday morning, April 20, 1967.

Might I inject here that it seems that CLA is proving to be a sort of grooming ground for its personnel who get any kind of recognition from our organization. You have read the old "ad": Join the Navy and See the World. We can now cite our own: Get elected to office in CLA and move up at your school. If I had the time (but it would actually take too long), I could cite the names of many persons elevated to positions in CLA who were, within a relatively short time, elevated to positions of high office at the schools where they work after receiving recognition from us. So I would advise those of you who seek advancement to higher levels of administration to work hard in CLA, get advanced to an office here and then sit back confidently to wait for your promotion at home. We practically guarantee you success. Our only regret is that this success is becoming detrimental to CLA because it is continually drawing these individuals out of and away from the organization—the best example to be given being that of one of the founders of the College Language Association, Hugh Gloster, who is presently the Dean of Faculties at Hampton and who will soon be the President of Morehouse College. This instance in itself points out the tremendous effect and influence of our Association.

At this point, I might comment that as the "lame-duck" and out-going President of CLA, I have confronted myself much during the past year especially with reflections about the purpose of the Association, its usefulness and its future. It has been in existence for a period of thirty years, it is now having is 27th Annual Meeting, it is made up of English and foreign language teachers who number more than 250 in some 57 schools and colleges located in twenty-two states ranging all the way from Brooklyn College in the East, in schools throughout the South and Mid-West, to Prairie View and Texas Southern located in another "country" formerly known as the state of Texas. We have also 34 institutional memberships. It seems to me that this complex of schools forms a very neat nucleus for an organization of far-reaching influence and strength. Relative to schools and departments in these areas, there is yet an untapped source of future membership which could project CLA alongside other organizations of similar nature. The Central States Modern Language Teachers Associ-

ation meeting in May at Cincinnati is now in its 50th year of operation. It is not exactly gray-bearded as yet by our American standards. It has gradually, over the years, built up its ranks to the point that it has become a bona fide contender in the area of recognized professional groups.

It is my feeling that CLA, under many handicaps, has waged a commendable battle to stave off the specter of integration, fusion and total obliteration by becoming merged with older and bigger national groups. It is true that we are seeking a pattern of social and professional indistinction in this country that will wipe out racial groupings. Our organization is largely a product of the old order and, under general circumstances, we would want to abolish a one-sided ethnic grouping. However, the founders and early supporters of this organization recognized the need for a medium of giving a greater outlet of expression to more persons who taught in schools of our type. At the point of its incipiency, it was almost absolutely necessary to form such an association so that the members could assemble and discuss their peculiar problems as well as their methods and research. In this way, they knew that they would be freed from the restrictive invitations infrequently coming their way.

In the wake of such discussion, we may ask if the situation and if the conditions have changed. Are our members being accepted willingly and wholeheartedly within the inner circles of other national and regional groups? To be truthful, we *are* being accepted and have been accepted for several years—on a limited basis as to active participation. We have even held offices in some of these. We have served in almost every capacity as the traditional members—on a limited basis. We teach in some of these schools—on a limited basis. What I am saying is that integration *is* taking place and has been taking place, but that, because of the slow pace of social and educational involvement, some of it brought about by our own inertia, we stand to lose valuable participation in the never-ending crunch and search for investigation of educational problems and research. Great gains have been made by our group of educators and some condescension has been given by those of the more national groups but common sense tells us that majorities never freely and willingly give up that which they have pos-

sessed and cherished. There is little doubt that, some day, we shall all walk together in professional brotherhood and sparkling amity, but there also seems to be little doubt that that day is not so near as we should like for it to be—what with human nature as it is.

What then is the future for the College Language Association? How does the picture shape up with respect to direction and responsibility? What role shall it play in order to project its influence and thereby grow in importance? Who knows? Does only the shadow know? I hope not.

The future of CLA depends upon the caliber of leadership which is placed at the head of the Association and the vigor of that leadership in plotting the direction and scope of the work to be done. To begin with, let me say that I am not pessimistic about the possibilities for greater importance because, first of all, our organization is recognized. And one of its principal assets for recognition is its official organ—the *CLA Journal*. One day, not too long ago, at Lincoln, where I work, one of the top faculty members who is the executive secretary of *his* professional organization, was in my office and happened to glance at one of the copies of the *Journal*. He examined it intently and at length. After a period of time, he said to me, "You know this is pretty good; we don't have anything like this. I think I'll see if we can't get one like it." Coming from this individual, that was one fine compliment because he is most critical, with a bit of envy. I suppose that it is no secret that all of us of CLA are exceedingly proud and grateful to our Editor Therman B. O'Daniel for the fine professional organ that he gets out for us. The work of his hands and the patience which he exhibits produce for us a creation of art and give us a recognition in the literary world which is up to now the best publicity that we could ever expect. It also serves as a news medium through which we keep abreast of the activities in which our various members are engaged. We can keep up to date about the make-up of the various committees and, periodically, we know who are the active members of the Association. Therefore, we salute our editor and we say, "Long may he reign!"

During our annual meetings and in the pages of the *Journal*, we are, and have been, engaging in the traditional research

normally carried on by such organizations as ours. Over the course of the years, I have heard, seen and read research material and problem papers as good as any viewed or heard in any other organ or meeting of like type. The research elite of CLA can hold their own with those of any other group. We have, therefore, personnel with which to work; all we have to do is harness it completely.

However, there is another area of work, and possible service, with which I, personally, am not satisfied; that is the work of our standing committees. The returns from these committees—even the simpler ones—are too meager and far too inconsequential. It is my belief that, given time, these committees could be made to perform and be effective much in the same manner as the various standing committees of the American Association of University Professors. The latter have become a potent force in the direction of affairs, activities and regulations in colleges and universities throughout the country. Likewise, but of course not on a scale so far-reaching, the committees of CLA could become a potent force implementing the several services which we have sought to render to the schools we serve. These ought not to be merely agencies for window dressing; in order to keep the departments of English and foreign languages alive and potent in our schools, they should present periodically fresh material for constant consumption.

I am not unaware, however, as to why, possibly, these committees seem slothful in their duties. Our schools are bursting at the seams with the influx of never-ending numbers of students, duties have thus multiplied, counseling has increased, and our teachers are mentally worn out and bone weary. Hence, the investigations and reports due from these committees suffer delays; in some cases, the reports are emaciated, and, in other cases, never appear at all.

However, he who seeks to conquer must constantly continue advancing. Demands must be met, investigations must move forward, and reports must come in if an association is to keep its name. Wouldn't we have to do this if we should merge with some other national group? If we wanted to be on the "in" and become recognized in this group, wouldn't we have to perform at the same pace and produce as the others? There

lies the challenge to us. We sink or swim, we live or die, we attain and accomplish or fail depending on the depth of our imaginative forces and the strength and vigor of our activity. What is our answer?

May we turn, briefly now, our attention to the theme of this Conference: *Language, Literature and Life.* Last year, we developed concepts about the Role of Language and Literature in the Shaping of World Thought. It seems to me that there is a definite concomitance between the two subjects; that of this year, more general, that of last year, more specific. I would say that the development of events throughout the world makes this theme more definitive and more acute. Man continues to write about his experiences, his imaginative flights of fancy, his aesthetic views, the intense social and political upheavals of today, and from all this, he tries to develop philosophical concepts which may stand the test of life and living.

Since the beginning of time and after man discovered that he could communicate, it seems that he has attempted to understand and explain first in oral exposition then in written form the facts and intricacies of life. He has never ceased to be amazed at the possibilities that lie undiscovered, or discovered but unexplained, relating in some way to human existence. He first discovered language—communication between himself and others—then he had the urge to discuss, to parlay information, to compile his findings, even to enjoy and entertain himself while setting down in written form certain aesthetic compositions, just as he has invented and used music for types of entertainment, for music is a type of literature, impressionistic perhaps, but communicative.

To begin with, language was a tool, and literature—the second development—was a by-product which sprang unknowingly from attempts to store knowledge and to offer relaxation from the drudgery of work in life. The human brain, the most complex and the least understood human mechanization known to man, began to function and to grind out, laboriously for the most part, information to be used for the later ages. It still did not realize the intricate power of communication and literary endeavor latent within its chemical make-up and in its computerized and electric-type cells of activity. Gradually, however, man became aware of his capacity for mental output—

a type of activity which helps him understand himself and those around him. In a prologue written by Dámaso Alonzo for the book *El español de Hoy, Lengua en Ebullición*, authored by Emilio Lorenzo, we find these words: " La lengua es vida y, como tal, cambio, energía, proyecto continuo. En ella, como en el hombre, confluyen tradición y novedad."

Now, it appears that there is an intense attempt on the part of all sophisticatedly learned men to plumb the depths of all known knowledge and information in order to determine an architectural and philosophical structure of living. " One of the greatest changes that has occurred during the past two or three generations," reports Harold Clark, Professor of Economics at Trinity University, " is in the expansion of the effort to discover new knowledge. In 1890, probably no more than 10 million dollars was spent by all agencies in the United States—universities, government, industry, private laboratories, and others—to discover new knowledge. . . . In 1965, the figure is close to 20 billion. Today there are probably a thousand times as many people working at discovering new knowledge as there were a hundred years ago." At the same time, it seems to be true also that there is a large segment of materialistically inclined individuals whose main purpose is to prostitute the avenues of literary output in order to milk every possible monetary gain from their literary grindings or they write to espouse causes which seem to lead nowhere. Sidney Sulkin, writing in the Introduction to the pamphlet entitled " The Challenge of Curricular Change," says at one point, " But as they pour into the schools and on up into the colleges, young people find that the *growth of knowledge* is not the same as the *growth of wisdom.* Unable to make sense out of the universe or man's role in it, they wave the banner of 'the absurd.'" In a time of despair and violent social upheaval, Stephen Bailey asks, " What relevance do they see in the curriculum to such troubling issues as survival, poverty, urban decay, prejudice? How deeply committed are educators to affirmative possibilities of the age? How can we help our students to look terror in the face without flinching? How can we help them in such a way as to inspire, not withdrawal in fear, but sober commitment and creative thoughts? How can we fashion the good society? A world, then, in which " explosive " has become

a cliché to describe population growth and the advance of knowledge, yet one in which "social wisdom is pathetically small."

It would seem, then, that the writers of literature who have a stake in the future of humanity ought to lend a hand in guiding and directing the exploration of life's avenues.

The great writers of every era are men whose intellectual influence has lived for hundreds and even thousands of years and has helped to mold civilization as it is known today. Their production constitutes the immortal treasures in which they dedicate themselves to unswerving devotion to truth. These men have written pages of great works which open up broad and changing horizons for the people of their day and for the people of today. They have helped us to develop a philosophy of life that will be a guide for our daily actions in this intricate and complex world. Shall we have to depend upon these traditional old researchers to continue to guide us? Are we of this age ready and willing to produce pages that will stand the test of universal scrutiny?

As I ask these questions, we are confronted once more with inquiries about the purpose of literature. I reiterate that literature developed because of man's need to evaluate himself and the social milieu in which he existed. He has felt compelled to record in some manner his feelings, his sentiments, his attitudes, his actions and the reactions to these on the part of those around him; on the other hand, he has felt the need to record his reactions to the experiences of others. It seems, therefore, that, throughout the history of civilizations, as man has left a history in some written form of what has been done, he appears to be groping, in a sense, to plumb the mysteries and unknown factors of life in order to analyze the purposes of life. It would appear, therefore, that, basically, the production of real literature is serious business. A novel, a play, a short story, a poem or poems, a biography or autobiography, a history, a work of criticism, etc.—they all have their message, or, shall we say, should have.

Valery Tarsis, Russian novelist, on giving an address recently in London, pronounced the following, "A mysterious stranger lives on Earth. She is beautiful and sublime like an antique goddess. Her temple is man's soul. And only grief

remains to him whom she abandons—Life for him then becomes a beastly, miserable and humiliating experience. Freedom is the name of the goddess."

This is literature, although it is political or social literature. It is not written to lull us into a sense of complacency or to entertain us; it is written to stir our thoughts, to create within us a climate for factual endoctrination. It is written in a serious vein.

To combat the rising tide of hack writers in every field of endeavor whose sole purpose, it seems, is to distort, to disrupt, to hoodwink, to falsify, to " feed on ill-gotten gain," there must rise up again in this modern era a new breed of creative literary artists whose creed it shall be to produce the truth for all phases of life. Of course, some of this material must needs be ideological because it will be written by mere human beings but it must be written from a source conceived in the soil of truth as one sees it.

To this end, the writer must decide that it is his divinely inspired commission to challenge what is and what has been with what he believes or finds to be true. He must decide that it is his right to challenge all of the social and political forces or other conceptual areas with his ideas of fact and truth. He must take sides and, with the potent weapons that he has, enter into polemic strife, if need be, to declare the strength of his convictions.

The man of literature must not be like Georges Simenon, French novelist, who is impatient with those who think a writer must necessarily have and express personal ideas concerning the great problems of philosophy, politics or economics; he claims not to have any such ideas, and in any case would not consider them as proper material for his novels, but it is my contention that the creator of literature must take his stand and project his theories on whatever side he chooses.

Marietta Fogel, writing in the Kansas City *Star* on March 28 of this year, says of Robert Bly, controversial American poet, that " while many writers feel that they are above engaging in political hassles and need deal only with such universal subjects as life and death, Bly has the opposite attitude. He has indicated that it is a poet's duty to speak out against whatever he feels is unjust in his society." Later she continues, " In his

social concerns, then as well as in his literary ones, Bly attempts to awaken others to a perceptive understanding of the world on both the imaginative and realistic levels."

Walter Lippman said a mouthful, when he spoke fairly recently at a convocation sponsored by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, in the following statement: " Since man's whole knowledge of things is not inherited and must be acquired anew by every generation, there is in every human society a culture, a tradition of the true and the false, the right and the wrong, of the good which is desirable and the bad which is to be avoided. This culture is rooted in the accepted version of the nature of things and of man's destiny. The accepted version evolves and the encyclopedias become outdated and have to be revised."

Our societies must not become ghettos of ignorance, prejudice and indifference where people bask " comfortably in the dull gray glow of the television set." [2] They must not lose their " commitment to care." [3] " We face a world," notes a *Newsweek* policy statement, " where there are no more easy answers but only hard, challenging problems." [4] The probers, the interpreters, the analysts of these problems must be wholesome and dedicated individuals whose principal task it will be to break down these economic, social, political, cultural or religious walls of prejudice, ignorance and indifference and then to build " up the things that unite men—literature, the arts, philosophy, the power of ideas that raise the mind and unfreeze the heart." [5]

These laborers and labors—for such they are—will give mankind extraordinary glimpses of insight into human nature through intense, wholesome studies and proposed solutions in the realms of art, music, the cinema, social manners, history, the theatre, language and literature. When we sum the whole thing up, we can " sing " with Frank Sinatra, " That's Life."

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[2] *Ramparts Magazine*: Advertising Flier, 1967.
[3] *Ibid.* [4] *Ibid.* [5] *Ibid.*