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THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH TEACHER IN WARTIME

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Can the teaching of English in American high schools remain unchanged by our entrance into World War II? And should it? If not, how should it be changed?

Early last December a request came from the National Council of Teachers of English for an answer to those questions. It was somewhat difficult to reply. War had been declared, but the question was an intellectual or an academic one. Today it is difficult to reply; not, however, because it is an intellectual question, but because emotion has intruded. With members of your circle or your family in the fighting forces somewhere in the Atlantic or Pacific or somewhere in the world, it is difficult to be objective. It is difficult in the face of practical considerations that enter into the daily activities of a teacher.

A few days after Christmas there was a memorable meeting in Chicago. The Executive Committee, the Planning Commission of the National Council, and English teachers—chiefly from the Chicago area—considered the role of the English teacher in wartime. The group was given galley sheets with the replies of individuals to the questions asked early in December. Subsequently the views were printed in the February *English Journal*. Small groups and large groups—with Dr. De Boer as an able discussion leader for the large groups—ex-

changed ideas for two days. The result was the statement, "The Role of the English Teacher in Wartime," incorporating and emphasizing the report of the Committee on Basic Aims. Another result was the preparation of pamphlets, *Teaching English in Wartime* and *Thinking Together: Promoting Democracy through Class Discussion*.

It is only too evident that the world has changed. It is not the same as it was at the beginning of August, 1941, when I journeyed from Chicago to San Francisco on the streamliner "City of San Francisco," crowded with youthful, attractive Japanese men and women and their well-behaved children, said to be rushing back to Japan because of the political situation. It is not the same world that we lived in when the Council met in Atlanta at Thanksgiving in 1941. How far we have traveled in that short space of time!

Those who raised the question of the role of the English teacher in the emergency had vision. We need direction. Attitudes change from day to day. In December emphasis was on winning the peace after the war. Murmurings have since hinted that it may not be best to dwell upon the peace after the war, not to attempt to follow the biblical injunction to be found in Matthew: "But I say to you, Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you; and pray for them that persecute and calumniate." It has been suggested that such a point of view assumes a victory, assumes that we are conquerors—merciful, to be sure, but nevertheless conquerors—

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when the pressing need is not conversion to the ways of peace after a war, but conversion, physical and mental, to the ways of war. In Steinbeck's novel *The Moon Is Down* the conquered knew the ways of peace.

As educators we are faced not only with the teaching of English but with the whole question of education during the war. Every administrator and teacher that I know is earnestly trying to do what is best for the world, for the nation, and for his community, which consists so largely of students and their parents. The situation calls for a consideration of values. Teachers must weigh in the balance, on one side, education; on the other, fatigue, from paid service in defense work; fatigue, from hours of voluntary service in first aid, nutrition, or air-raid work; fatigue, from involuntary service in the war effort. Already a teacher has said of another teacher, "Please forgive what he said. His nerves are on edge."

After extra hours of war work, whether voluntary or involuntary, are teachers fresh, rested, sparkling, calm, poised? Are they prepared for their work as educators?

Pupils without foresight have been delighted with enforced changes. In some cases brief vacations have been almost doubled. Pupils regret that the school newspaper has not been published, but they are consolable in that a report card has been omitted. College entrance requirements have been modified. Distractions are numerous and often lucrative.

This is war. Community responsibilities are more than ever desirable. We must strain every fiber to win. We shall have cause for rejoicing if all our air raids continue to be drills and not disasters. What *is* the way to win the war—and the peace?

Few public spokesmen in America dissent from the necessity for education, education of the full potentialities of each individual. Dr. Alonzo Grace, the commissioner of education in Connecticut, expressed the idea with directness:

One need not feel that he is failing to aid his country because he devotes his effort to the school program. We are engaged in one of the most important enterprises in a democracy. Shall we volunteer for work? For service as air raid wardens? . . . Rationing procedures? I should say, by all means, when one's health and effectiveness in the classroom are not impaired. But one is not failing to serve his country by doing the teaching job better—more patience—more understanding.

The recent report of Will Hays on *The Motion Picture in a World at War* began:

"Business as usual" is a counsel of complacency which everyone today rightly repudiates. . . . First things come first, and there is nothing which takes precedence over the duties of war. . . . But business cannot, and should not, go on as usual; there are some phases of national life so essential to our well-being and for victory that they should be intensified rather than diminished. Education must go on. The services of religion must be uninterrupted. . . . Whatever upholds moral standards and contributes to morale must be sustained—in fact, augmented. For these things to go on as usual—even more intensely than usual—is not a distraction from the war effort. These things strengthen the sinews of our people and fortify them, as much as armaments and leadership, for the grim and arduous enterprise in which they are now engaged.

Reported from London on April 18 was the Children's Charter, a possible platform for the allied nations. Three of the six aims are directly our province: "The personality of the child is sacred; and needs of the child must be the foundation of any good educational system. Every child shall have equal opportunity of access to the nation's stores of knowledge and wisdom. There shall be full-time schooling for every child." The

president of the British Board of Education declared education the greatest factor contributing to peace in the future.

So much for education in general. Now for English in particular. When some English teachers were asked about the teaching of English in the emergency, they advised teaching the meaning of military insignia. In the opinion of many of us, such instruction would result merely in a skill as distinguished from knowledge; it would represent a short view rather than a long one. The same is true of the teacher who would favor the "inside" series by Gunther but would see no merit in Chinese or Mexican legends, South American literature, or American folklore.

English has had a favored place in the curriculum. Several forces might seem to operate to deprive it of that position; for example, fused or integrated courses, the present concentration upon mathematics, physics, and training for industry. But English has vitality. It is a powerful subject, far more than drills or skills. It is a means of communication seldom if ever mastered; a means of stimulating emotion, of effecting success or failure, with the sorrow that failure brings. It is a means of sharpening perceptions and understandings. Recent studies of language have made us reflect upon language in action; upon the importance of tone, gesture, and intent; upon the chameleon quality of words. An appreciation of the English language has been taught through emphasis upon simple words and their context.

A democracy depends upon the use of words, upon the ability to understand and to discuss questions of freedom, liberty, labor; upon the ability to trace the course of thought and to detect specious arguments, those of your friends or those

in magazines or books or those communicated through the radio. We questioned the junior who wrote in an original play for broadcasting, "Wars are never won by words." He came to see that words may be bullets. The pamphlet *Thinking Together* illustrates discussion methods.

Reading difficulties may really be language difficulties. The passage whether printed or spoken may be beyond the would-be reader's comprehension.

In the interpretation of literature, war brings orientation. It makes old things new. Consider possible reactions to this passage from A. Edward Newton's *James Boswell—His Book* in 1918 when it was published and during the Battle of Britain.

James Boswell is coming into his own. The biographer will outlive the essayist, brilliant and wonderful writer though he be; and I venture on the prophecy that, when the traveler from New Zealand takes his stand on the ruined arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's, he will have a pocket edition of Boswell with him, in which to read something of the lives of those strange people who inhabited that vast solitude when it was called London.

Human struggles in books have strange power to move. Everyone can make a list of books reborn for him through the total war with its end of four or more freedoms: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals*, *Clive*, *War and Peace*, *Victory*, *Broad and Alien Is the Land*, and *The Return of the Native*, with its ageless, imperturbable heath. The National Council pamphlet *Teaching English in Wartime* suggests groups and titles. Literature is a storehouse of the experience of mankind, of human beings; it is one of the humanities. It transcends anything that can be measured by a short-answer test. The objectivity of literature may truly console and sustain, as Arnold said of poetry. Its peace and se-

renity may give balance and a sense of normalcy, and fortitude, when total war dominates the situation.

People like books. Education has to be devised for soldiers in Iceland, for example, with four hours of daylight and a lack of actual warfare. Books are sought for soldiers. Tested books, sometimes forbiddingly called classics, have a wide sale in many inexpensive forms.

Norman Cousins in the *Saturday Review of Literature* criticized the ending of *The Moon Is Down*. To me as an English teacher with a faith in the memorizing of great literature, there was excitement in the repetition at a crucial moment of a passage learned, imperfectly learned as a schoolboy, a passage from Socrates' *Apology*.

Poetry is close to people, not caviar to the general. Unsuspected people try to write it: doctors, secretaries, bookkeeping teachers. As creator, Robert Frost plunged his all to write it. Masfield's devotion is familiar knowledge. In the April *Atlantic* Howard Spring told of John Drinkwater's reading of poetry during the last World War wherever men would listen, and there was plenty of evidence of the success of the "astonishing experiment." To quote: "Men filled the rooms where he read, and listened breathless—men of every rank, commissioned and non-commissioned, and of every sort, down even to those one would have considered hopeless 'toughs.' It was a remarkable demonstration of the appeal of pure poetry," which Drinkwater, then unknown, felt was the most exciting thing in life. Norman Corwin and Archibald MacLeish, too, have found uses for poetry.

A. E. Newton in London saw delightful ghosts, including the former inhabitants of Gough Square. Teachers who have taught for a number of years may see ghosts in their classrooms, often delightful ones, sometimes problem ghosts, of those who have come for English and have gone out into the world to honor or obscurity. They help us to know the present occupants of our classrooms, and English teachers have been found to know more of their pupils than teachers of other subjects. It is almost inevitable from the nature of English teaching. English teachers cannot always know what is happening at home. Recently parents have confessed that they have been so busy with war work that they have not known. It is more than ever important that English teachers see the whole problem of education and the significant contribution of language and literature to the development of the maximum power of each individual who has the privilege of living in our democracy. In a war-torn world pupils must have a feeling of security that comes from the ability to use language and to interpret it. They must have understanding that comes from an emotional as well as an intellectual study of human beings as revealed by literature. Arnold said of poetry, and I believe truly of all literature, that the instinct of self-preservation will keep it alive. The role of the English teacher in the emergency is to try to think through our plight with consideration for the language that we hold dear, the books that are treasure-houses of experience, and the generation which will need, as we all do, balance, tolerance, sympathy, and courage.