

DRI for Life

Literature for Life

By Lee Craig

What does reading literature have to do with the mission of DRI for Life? Some might suggest reading that we read mostly as a pleasurable respite or for entertainment. That certainly is true in the cases of, say, mystery stories or romance novels. But I say reading real literature is more, and more essential to life, than that.

Our vital activity, from birth onward, ought to be ceaseless looking around ourselves for information; information about the world and about the matter of being an individual human in it; information that we can accumulate and that can support us in the next hour and the next and the one after that. In that way one acquires, hopefully, some adeptness to navigate this thing called a life.

The indispensable function of literature, then, is to enlarge our experience of the business of being human; to give us exponentially more information than we can glean from our own circle and surroundings, and thus to inculcate references within us that will shape how we live. Let me be clear. By references I certainly don't mean vacuities such as "Coexist" or "Just Say No." Nor do I mean any specific rules or lessons. Rather I mean the power of discernment, that is, to recognize and prefer wisdom over foolishness; quality over inferiority; genuineness over fakery.

It is, of course, possible to acquire a certain amount of discernment without having read a single book. But one's resources are naturally

limited, in such case, as I have alluded, primarily to one's circle and surroundings. On the other hand, in literature we have before us the world in full.

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any living being with whom we are likely to come in contact. The same can be said (plucking a few more) of Austen's novels, Eliot's poems, or Shakespeare's tragedies. The wealth of human experience open to us in books is practically infinite.

I say that the significance of this resource, to whatever progress each of us will make toward becoming a fully realized person, cannot be overstated. Without making some such progress, we never can hope to become even substantial. And without literature, most of us could not make great progress.

The Princeton scholar, Charles Grosvenor Osgood, has something to say about this in the course of arguing that the essence of literature (as I have been trying to describe it) is found most abundantly in biography. The following language appears in Osgood's introduction to his 1917 edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

Biography is the literature of realized personality, of life as it has been lived, of actual achievements or shortcomings, of success or failure; it is not imaginary and embellished, not what might be or might have been, not reduced to prescribed or artificial forms, but it is the unvarnished story of that which was delightful, disappointing, possible or impossible, in a life spent in this world. For this reason it is more authentic than all other kinds of literature, and more relevant. Osgood means, of course, *great* biography. But here he comes to the point.

The thing that most concerns me, the individual, whether I will or no, is the management of myself in this world. The fundamental and essential conditions of life are the same in any age, however the adventitious circumstances may change. The beginning and the end are the same, the average length the same, the problems and the prize the same. How, then, have others managed, both those who failed and those who succeeded, or those, in far greatest number, who did both? Let me know their ambitions, their odds, their handicaps, obstacles, weaknesses and struggles, how they finally fared, and what they had to say about it. Let me know a great variety of such instances that I may mark their disagreements, but more especially their agreement about it.

Whether one buys Osgood's argument for the supremacy of biography, he has expressed well the function of all literature. His words ought to inspire us in our reading. Surely it cannot be denied that an attentive life, liberally exposed to the "great variety" of ways that others have "managed themselves" in the world, will be a richer, more satisfying life; a life more fully lived.



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