
TUNNICLIFFE, Stephen. Methuen, London, 1984. Poetry Experience: Teaching and Writing Poetry in secondary schools.

This book comprises one unit in a series published under the general title, 'Teaching Secondary English.'¹ In his preface to the series, the General Editor, Peter King, announces that the purpose of the series is 'to help teachers get a purchase on their day-to-day activities'; the series is directed primarily at inexperienced teachers and student teachers, and it aims not so much to advance any radically new ideas, as to combine recent thought with 'the best of older traditions'.

No 'ready-made philosophy' will be found here; instead, the reader can hope for 'a map of the English teaching landscape in which the separate volumes highlight an individual feature of that landscape', and the ultimate aim is to present 'the overall topography' of the discipline. Not philosophy, but geography is offered here. The approach, on the face of it, appears eminently practical; language teaching (to many of its practitioners a Hydra which sprouts two more heads each time the academic Heracles strikes at one) is neatly categorized, and each category is given concentrated and considered attention. But questions arise what are the theoretical grounds for this topographical approach, and to what extent does each volume address itself to the fundamentally integrated nature of language learning?

Poetry Experience begins by declaring its intention of affirming the significance of the geographical metaphor. The epigraph is the poem 'Baling Out':

Be my escape, my parachute,
fabric of words;

language is your 'harness of great verbs' which will float you down to the 'vowelled earth'. The hatchway is 'the tip of language' and, looming

beneath. you see 'the green nouns of reality, and leap.' Well, what a jump.

You jump into a book that tells you that 'poetry matters', and there is plenty that follows to show that, to Tunnicliffe, it does. His concern is the meaningful teaching of poetry in an age of conformity, of mass responses, of the submersion of individuality. What we teachers need to do is to wrest poetry 'out of its academic niche or literary featherbed' into a world in which 'the teaching of poetry becomes poetry experience'. Hardly new, the sentiment, though always worth repeating.

For the beginning teacher, Tunnicliffe offers much valuable practical advice. He considers criteria for choosing poems (the age-range is 11-16 years), the use of poetry in thematic work, oral poetry and its performance in classrooms (a form of poetry, he argues, that must be memorized to be appreciated), the exemplary teaching of rhythm and imagery. Of particular interest are the chapters on writing poetry - an experience inseparably connected to the reading of it - and on the teaching of poetry in a multi-cultural context. The final chapter discusses the assessment and evaluation of poetry in schools. Tunnicliffe asserts that the evaluation of accumulated course work - in preference to isolated exercises and examinations - is the only viable approach, and offers a scheme by which this can be done. The book ends with an extensive catalogue of 'Sources and Resources' and an appendix of 'Some Poems' referred to in earlier chapters.

The Book, then, covers the ground from horizon to horizon. But one senses, again and again, that each tract on the landscape is given not much more than a passing glance. A passing glance is better than nothing? Perhaps, but not by much.

Consider, for example, the chapter on 'Critical Appreciation'. The prefatory remarks alert us (in one page) to the dangers of 'watered-down "lit. crit." with junior classes'; well and good, but what follows

as an alternative? A methodological description of group work (method, aims, notes, poems recommended for study). There is much to commend the method proposed (it focusses on pupils formulating and comparing questions themselves rather than "answering" questions imposed on them), but nowhere is there to be found any explanation of why this method is better than any other. Surely Tunnicliffe knows as well as anyone that any method which is not justified - and seen to be justified - on educational and aesthetic grounds is acutely vulnerable to abuse. Open-mindedness is never a substitute for critical theory. Hardly a word is written on the difficult and complex issues of the nature of literary reception, interpretation, comprehension and validation. In this instance, silence seems a 'ready-made philosophy' in itself. This is nothing less than intellectual short-circuiting; random "methodology" masks an absence of insight. One plummets from the aeroplane smack into a selected field, without a parachute, and blindfolded. And then discovers in the final paragraph of the chapter that the theory on which the method is based is, in fact, deconstruction. This theory can, apparently, be explained in one sentence, and the reason for applying it, writes Tunnicliffe, is that it 'seems a better model for English Teachers' than the other one. There are only two. And that's the end of the chapter.

It is a great pity that Tunnicliffe has resorted on occasions to such short-cuts; some of the preceding chapters offer a good deal of useful discussion on the teaching of poetry and, as he mentions, 'it may be that in the past there has been an over-emphasis on criticism at the expense of creation? But, if this is so, the imbalance will not be redressed by ignoring the issues involved. Perhaps these issues are not Tunnicliffe's concern. After all, he is writing a book which will 'have enough of the smell of the classroom' to encourage teachers to read it. Maybe teachers get enough of this smell in their daily practice; maybe they want other aromas to pervade their after-hours critical

reading. Even student teachers, one suspects, will want to don a more elaborate intellectual parachute before making the jump into a classroom.

NOTES

1. Other titles in the Series:

Pauline Chater, Marking and Assessment in English

David Jackson, Encounter with Books: Teaching Fiction 11 - 16

Lewis Knowles, Encouraging Talk

Robert Protherough, Encouraging Writing

Don Smedley, Teaching the Basic Skills