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ENGLISH ACADEMY

Examinations in English Language and Literature

by G. KNOWLES-WILLIAMS

IN DRAWING up the programme for this Inaugural Meeting of the English Academy of Southern Africa, we felt that we could not leave out the vexed and thorny problem of Examinations in English, even though it has been so much discussed and chewed over that there seems little or nothing fresh to say about it. I had hoped that Professor Gardner would talk on this subject but he was, unfortunately, unable to do so. As time was short and the programme had to be printed, I undertook, without quite realising what I had let myself in for, to fill the gap. I am aware that I am not an adequate substitute for Prof. Gardner. I have, moreover, echoing uncomfortably in my ears, a remark made by Professor Guy Boas "that more rubbish is talked about English Examinations than about most aspects of education, which is saying a good deal."

My credentials for talking on this wide subject, which includes examinations in language and literature at the school and university level, are, when I come to look at them, not very impressive, because my experience has been fairly limited. Many years ago I taught English in a Junior High School for a short period. I was involved three times in the marking of Matriculation examinations in English. I may say that I vowed after this experience that only abject poverty would induce me again to undergo such strain and drudgery. For the past 25 years I have lectured in English Literature at the university level and have therefore been dealing continually with the products of our schools. I have throughout this period been made acutely conscious both of the difficulty of setting examinations in English literature, and assessing the answers to the questions set. Because of the limited nature of my experience, therefore, I shall, perforce, have to generalise largely on the experience of others in talking of examinations at the school level. I shall undoubtedly beg a good many questions and leave a good many loose ends; but I shall try, at any rate, to state the problems and open the way for discussion which will, I hope, prove fruitful.

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Examination essential

We are all agreed, I imagine, that there must be some kind of examination, some means of evaluating progress and deciding on promotions to a higher class or course, some yardstick which will enable us to measure proficiency and award certificates and degrees. Indeed, as Jacques Barzun says in his wise and entertaining book "Teacher in America," "examinations are not things that happen only in schools, they are a recurring feature of life, whether in the form of decisive interviews to pass, of important letters to write, or life and death diagnosis to make, or meetings to address, or girls to propose to." The consensus of educational opinion is that examinations at the conclusion of a course have a value for pupils, teachers and for the community generally. The problems are what kind of examinations in English should be set in the school and the university; and how to overcome the difficulties of assessing candidates' answers. The **right** kind of examination is stimulating and helpful. It provides the incentive to make efforts that most pupils need. It is a way of registering progress year by year. Success in an examination builds up much needed confidence in the pupil's ability to take his hurdles. To the teacher also, the examination is an incentive and an indicator of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of his teaching.

Bad examinations, however, ill-planned and marked by incompetent or inexperienced examiners, can have a deplorable influence on pupils, teachers and schools. Examinations can become a tyranny rather than a stimulus. Where a premium is put upon memory work and not on the ability to select and organise material into coherent statement, there is the danger, in the words of Dr. Henning at the Natal Conference last year, that education will degenerate into the futile formula — "swot, regurgitate, forget." The whole content and method of teaching English will, inevitably, be profoundly influenced by the kind of public examinations set. It is no exaggeration to say, as Professor Guy Boas remarks, "that the whole future of the teaching of

English in schools, its very existence, indeed, as a school subject, depends on the sanity and enlightenment with which examining bodies do their work."

My subject is "Examinations in English language and literature"; and I would stress at this stage, that the study of language and literature are not two subjects but one — since the aim of the teacher of both is to equip pupils to express themselves and to understand the expression of others. The teacher of English, whether he is teaching language or literature, is continually concerned with both intelligent reading and accurate expression. The two cannot be separated. You cannot be said to understand what you read unless you are articulate and comment coherently on what you have read; and to be able to do this you must have acquired the elements of grammar and composition. You must be able to observe the conventions of communication in language, syntax, punctuation, idiom, paragraphing and spelling. You must have a fair vocabulary. If you have not mastered the fundamentals you will not yourself be comprehensible nor will you be able to comprehend.

The disciplines of writing and speech do not come naturally to young people. They have to be taught; and the time to teach them is in the Primary School. If the foundations are not well laid in the Primary School, the Secondary School cannot do its work properly; and if the Secondary School does not do its work properly, the universities are frustrated in their attempts to provide Higher Education. If the universities fail to produce scholars, teachers and examiners are imcompetent. The vicious circle, once set in motion, leads to frustration and recriminations all round. Teachers of English in Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, Training Colleges and Universities must get together and thrash out their problems, not in sporadic conferences but in a sustained and constructive way. They must decide what each expects from the other and how best they can co-operate in drawing up syllabuses, deciding on methods of teaching, and in examining the proficiency of candidates.

In the Primary School

As I see it, the main emphasis in the Primary School should be on learning to read, write and speak simple English. To achieve this aim steady discipline throughout the Primary School period is essential. This need not take the form of dull grammar grinding. If the study of language is closely linked with the reading of books suitable to the age of the child, it can be harnessed at all stages to interest; if, that is, the teacher is competent and himself interested in books. In discussions of any aspect of education one always comes back to the primary importance of **quality** in the teacher. Without enough teachers of good quality effective instruction in the discipline of language usage is not possible.

Such examinations as are set in the Primary School should be designed to test these elementary skills in language usage — comprehension, simple precis, vocabulary tests, the retelling of stories read, spelling and punctuation. Examinations will be internal, not public. The passing or failing of pupils will be based mainly on incidental short tests, oral and written with, perhaps, one more formal but not in any way terrifying, examination, at the end of the year. The same process should be continued in the first three years of the Secondary School, the tests given being of the same kind but of greater difficulty, and the emphasis always being on careful reading and accurate expression. During this period books suitable to the ages and tastes of pupils should be read for pleasure and as providing matter of a factual kind for written work; but no efforts should be made at this stage to test literary appreciation. Literary appreciation can only be based on sound understanding of language — on reading as widely as possible, and on continual practice in writing clearly and grammatically. The attempt to introduce examinations in literature at this early stage is, I think, unwise. The skilful teacher who is a lover of his subject, as all English teachers should be, will, in incidental discussion of books, help pupils to understand and enjoy the kind of literature suitable to their age and interests. But the attempt at too early an age to link the reading of English literature with examinations which demand appreciation and evaluation on the part of the pupil, will have unhappy consequences. It will encourage insincerity and vague gush and may well establish that divorce in the pupils' mind between literature and enjoyment which is a deplorable feature in the state of mind of so many people in our modern world to whom literature is identified with dreary swotting up of facts and second-hand opinions for examinations.

In the High School

Reading during the first 3 years of the Secondary School should be as free, wide and unprescribed as possible; and teachers should be free to choose books and explore and experiment according to the type of class they are dealing with. With good teachers and plenty of time for English set aside on the time-table, the formal study of language and the informal study of literature can proceed side by side and the time devoted to reading will bear fruit in an enriched vocabulary and a better grasp of syntax and composition through the study of good examples. During the last two years of the High School period, however, the problem of examinations in literature has to be faced. Before

pursuing this subject I want to comment briefly on the pattern of public examinations in language which has emerged over the years, since in spite of differences of opinion as to the relative merits of the types of questions set, the examination of laguage is less difficult and less controversial than the examination of literature.

The pattern, with variations, which has emerged, and which seems to be the most acceptable we have been so far able to evolve, includes the following types of question: The comprehension test of unseen passages of both prose and verse. This type of test, provided the passages are carefully chosen and the questions carefully framed (examining is, after all, a highly skilled art) seems a logical and sensible method of trying to assess the ability to understand what is read. It is also valuable as providing matter for the writing of paragraphs of descriptive or explanatory prose, for vocabulary testing, and the testing of the usage of **common** figures of speech and of elementary prosody. Some formal grammar questions — which are necessary and serve as an incentive to careful study of language — provided that these are not trick questions but are tests of understanding of ordinary language usage; the rewriting in lucid prose of a passage of clumsy or jungle English; précis, which seems to me a commendable exercise in picking out essentials; and the essay, and letter.

The Essay

The essay is, admittedly, the most difficult question in the language paper to mark; but I am glad, nevertheless, that it has not disappeared from our examination papers. The writing of an essay on a given topic demands on the part of the candidate, the exercise of those qualities it is so essential for an educated person to possess — the power of selecting and arranging material into coherent and sustained statement, the power of following out a line of thought and linking ideas together logically, the power in short, of untilising information and not merely spilling it out in disjointed fragments.

American teachers have, of late years, roundly condemned the practice of replacing the writing of sustained essays by so-called "objective" tests and one-word answers. They have emphasised the deplorable results in the field of language of the virtual disappearance in examination papers of the essay type of question. Because the formal essay, or the answer to a question which demands what amounts to an essay, is so difficult to assess, educationalists tried, some years ago, to substitute tests which, they claimed, were more "scientific" and "objective" and which would be much easier to mark. In this age of excessive public veneration of science, the magic word "scientific" blinded educationalists to the fact that the very kind of ability we want most to encourage—the power of sustained thinking and coherent explanation — is not susceptible of scientific measurement. As Barzun says, "Science cannot help us classify the things we care about when we enter the realm of mind. When it attempts classification, it achieves something other than it intended." The replacement in America of the essay type of question by the "objective test" or short or one-word answer, has resulted in a marked deterioration in the standard of written English. Any tendency, therefore, to repeat this unsuccessful experiment in South Africa should be firmly resisted. "Taking an objective test," says Barzun, "is simply pointing. It calls for the least effort of mind above that of keeping awake: recognition. And it is recognition without a shock, for to a veteran of twelve years old, the traditional four choices fall into a soothing rhythm. No tumult of surprise, followed by a rallying generalship and concentration, as in facing an essay question; no fresh unfolding of the subject under unexpected demand, but the routine sorting out of the absurd from the trivial, or the completing of dull sentences, by word or thought clichés. No other practice explains more fully the intellectual defects of our students up to and through graduate school, than their ungrained association of knowledge and thought with the scratching down of check marks on dotted lines."

When I was in America and Canada for six months in 1958, I visited English Departments in 28 of the best universities. I found that all of them had introduced compulsory courses in English Composition for Freshmen, because they found that students had not learnt grammar and composition at school and could not, therefore, make good progress in any subject at the university level. Without reviewing at any length the quarrel between the "grammarians" and the "anti-grammarians," I would suggest that language cannot be mastered without some systematic training in word relationship. All grammars, old and new, as Professor Charlton Laird says, are leaky. No grammar adequately explains usage in a continually changing language. But it is better to teach a leaky grammar than to teach no grammar at all. At the university stage I have dealt with students who have been "exposed" to education in our schools for twelve years and who have emerged virtually innocent of any knowledge of formal grammar. They shudder at the mention of nouns, verbs and adjectives as if the whole subject were in some way obscene. Under these circumstances I find it well nigh impossible to help them to overcome their language difficulties since I cannot explain to them the source of their errors. On this subject of the teaching of grammar in America Barzun has some forceful things to say in "The House of Intellect." "To appreciate the extent of the intellectual disaster

brought on by the liquidation of grammar and to gauge the fanaticism, the bad reasoning, the incapacity to come to a point, the self-righteousness of the anti-grammarians, one should scan the five hundred page report of the Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English on what they first called 'The English Curriculum' but later renamed 'The English Language Arts' (published in 1952). The volume is one long demonstration of the authors' unfitness to tell anybody anything about English."

All teachers responsible

There is one other point about the teaching and testing of language which I want to emphasize before I pass on to the subject of examinations in literature. The writing of English cannot be taught exclusively in a course called English Composition. It can only be taught by the united efforts of the entire teaching staff. Every teacher, whether he likes it or not, is a teacher of language; and an answer to a history question or a translation from French cannot be called correct if the grammar is faulty and the expression loose and obscure. If all teachers marked down pupils on bad English and not merely on inaccurate information, which they somehow manage to pick out from among scrappy, disconnected statements obscurely expressed, there would be an immediate improvement in the standard of written English. The English teacher should not be expected to carry the burden of literacy for the whole school. "A written exercise," as one tired teacher remarked, "is designed to be read; it is not supposed to be a challenge to clairvoyance. My Italian-born tailor periodically sends me a post card which runs: 'Your clothes is ready and should come down for a fitting.' I understand him, but the art I honour him for is cutting cloth, not precision of utterance."

The limitations inherent in all written examinations particularly emphasize themselves in the case of literature, because what we are trying to test in a literature examination is the candidates' response to literature. We are trying to examine the **Spirit** of literature which is a very difficult thing to do. We desire in our literature classes to stimulate enjoyment of literature, but we are aware that this aim is likely to be defeated by the candidates' knowledge that he will be examined on what he has read. For this reason, and because of the difficulty of marking answers to questions on literature, some teachers have advocated the abolition of all examinations in literature. Yet we know that if we abolish examinations in literature, the subject is likely to be squeezed out of the syllabus altogether, and the time allotted to it given to subjects which are to be examined. The incentive to careful reading provided by examinations will, moreover, be removed. We are, indeed, on the horns of a dilemma here. We must retain formal examinations in literature if the subject is to remain on the time table, but if we retain them we are in danger of destroying the enjoyment of literature we want to stimulate. Then also, if we retain the examination in literature and insist that during the last two years in the Secondary School prescribed books should be studied for examination purposes, how are we to avoid more cramming, and the committing to memory of second-hand opinions about books? The problem follows us beyond the school into the university where the main emphasis will be on the study of literary texts, intensively, or extensively or both.

At the school stage we limit ourselves to a certain number of prescribed texts and have to devise means of testing factual knowledge of these texts — in order to make sure that the candidates have actually read them with some care — and, at the same time, include questions which will be tests, however simple, of the power of evaluating and discerning underlying meanings and themes. Most of us, I imagine, would agree with Professor Boas, that, at the school stage at any rate, examinations in literature without prescribed texts, are apt to be farcical since the result in "superficial guess work, the cramming of who-wrote-what-and-when, with no reading of the books themselves and a study of Shakespeare confined to the Tales of the Lamb. In such general papers it has been said 'as the examiner has not the slightest idea what the pupil has read and the pupil has not the slightest idea what the examiner will ask, the campaign proceeds upon territory of such unlimited dimensions that it is exceedingly difficult for either combatant to encounter the other at all." We must therefore prescribe books, and we must face the appalling difficulty of finding the right kind of question — which will not be a trick question nor too difficult for the average student — but will be sufficiently challenging to give scope to the brighter student. The kind of compromise which appears to be aimed at in the literature paper is a mixture of two types of question — of questions of a rather general nature intended to produce information about plot, characters and themes in a play or novel or short story, and requiring an essay-type answer, with some scope for critical comment on a simple level; and textual questions necessitating more detailed consideration of selected passages, passages with some special difficulties in language or some special relevance to underlying meanings.

At the University

The two types of question thus foreshadowed at the school stage are now carried over with additional complications into the university. The additional complications are — the study of literary periods, as well as of representative texts, and the

linguistic studies in Anglo-Saxon, Middle English and phonetics. At the university stage the differences of emphasis in the approach of literary studies have resulted in a quite heated controversy as to the relative merits of the so-called "practical criticism" approach, and the historical approach, or the method of lectures on periods and authors. The difficulty is that university teachers want to try and give students a wide view of the development and variety of English Literature so that they may see authors in the context of their age, and individual poems or prose works in the context of the whole body of the author's work; and, at the same time, they want to train students in the technique of careful and exact reading, which necessitates close study of selected texts. The time is short and the assignment is very heavy. We know only too well that general lectures on authors and periods tend to encourage cramming for examinations and the retaining of second-hand opinions about books and authors of which the student may have little or no first-hand knowledge. Yet we feel that candidates who are awarded degrees in English should have done some general reading in periods of literature, should be able to recognise the specific flavours of literature as they emerge in different literary periods, and have some understanding of how literature is affected by historical context. Helen Gardner in a recent essay in "Critical Quarterly," demands of the English School at a university that it should aim at "inclusiveness," though not only at inclusiveness. Inclusiveness, not, of course, in the sense that a student should read everything that conceivably comes under the heading of English Literature — this would be manifestly absurd. "All syllabuses must select and all teachers have to select within the syllabus." But inclusiveness in the sense that it is better to know something about something than to know nothing about whole areas of English Literature. "To know something may," as she says, "awaken the desire to know more." She reminds us of Bacon's advice and suggests that we should encourage our students to taste and swallow as well as to chew and digest. If, as A. D. Hall says in "English Studies in Africa," "a student uses ideas, be they common to literary studies or to humanity at large, in a relevant way, one cannot say these things are second-hand; he may have picked them up, but if he can handle them he has made them his own."

The demand for inclusiveness must somehow be met in method and in examination; and the only way it can be met is by the inclusion in examination papers of questions of the essay type in which candidates are required to select matter from general reading or from lectures and arrange it into a coherent statement which is relevant to the question asked. The other demand which must also be met, however, in the English Courses at the university, and which is certainly no less important than the demand for inclusiveness, is for training in careful and exact reading of texts. This necessitates the spending of a good deal of time on practical criticism — the examination in manageable discussion groups of selected texts and the learning of certain techniques and skills.

If, as Helen Gardner says, the main functions of a university English course are "to make those young people who choose to study this subject, read more widely, intelligently and deeply than they would otherwise do, and produce scholars," it is clear that a compromise between various approaches to literature must be sought; and examination papers must reflect this compromise in a mixture of both types of questions, the essay type and the textual type, which have distinct and valuable functions.

The dangers of superficiality, insincerity and mere memory work which may afflict the historical approach, are matched by the dangers of narrowness, priggishness and over-ingenious symbol hunting, which the practical criticism approach may lead to. In our South African universities, and more particularly in Afrikaans universities, where students are poverty-stricken in background reading and have a poor grasp of language, if we limit ourselves by too much intensive study of relatively few texts, we may produce what Mr. Hall calls "skilled illiterates who can connect nothing with nothing;" and we shall certainly fail to give our students the width of acquaintance with literature which they so desperately need. More time can profitably be spent on practical criticism where we are dealing with students who have a fair background of reading and facility in the use of English; but people need (as one critic puts it) "to be able to formulate and defend opinions of their own before practical criticism is of much use to them." They need to be mature and articulate. In dealing with students who have read very little English and are painfully inarticulate, the method of practical criticism must be cautiously applied. University teachers of English must try various approaches and adapt methods to suit particular types of student and aim at the desirable compromise between the conflicting claims of width and depth in scholarship. In setting examinations they will need to use both types of question and by a very careful framing of the questions they must try to avoid the dangers inherent in both approaches.

