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"THOUGHTS from the WORKSHOP"

H. M. BIRKETT

'QUOT homines, tot sententiae' is never more aptly illustrated than at a conference of teachers of English. The Workshop, organized in May by the 'Symposium' Group at the College of Education to consider the teaching of English composition, proved no exception to this rule. If the purpose of the Workshop was to hammer out a directive on the teaching of written English, then it was a failure: if the purpose was to start ideas like hares along the trodden and untrodden ways of teaching, leaving only lightly sketched trails for plodding pedagogues to trace and attempt to follow, then it was a great success. And the ideas, it soon become evident, did set their course along the two sides of the question posed by Mr. Ronnie Weaver on the first day: the question of whether the goal of teaching was the achievement of a good functional English style by the pupil or the power of artistic self-expression and fulfilment.

The two trends of thought on the subject, seeming at first to move in divergent directions, came full circle at the end in the perfect round of the teaching of English. The power of self-expression enables a man to communicate fully with his fellows; the ability to communicate fully with his fellow men affords a man self-expression. There, it was evident, was the perfect round to be achieved. With the child as his centre, the teacher must trace with his pedagogic pencil the three hundred and sixty degrees of perfection.

If the circle was complete, did it matter from which point on its circumference it was started? The two sides of the Workshop obviously thought it did, for it was—and is—painfully evident that rarely is the circle completed. Either there is not time, or the child flies off centre, and a broken arc or angular ellipse is the result. Therefore the Workshop concerned itself largely with debating the primary direction of teaching: towards a disciplined functional English—the international means of communication between peoples as diverse as Japanese and German and with whom the English-speaking person must communicate, particularly in America, or towards expression of ideas and emotions that need to be released in the mother-tongue for the full development of the ego. Along each side ran the third thread of controversy: how to 'motivate' the child to be the centre for either direction of setting out, and not to leave him the resistant rebel that sent either method off course. Finally the circle closed on the last day in the animated argument on the result of ten years' teaching from no-one-knew-which-way-round, as portrayed in an essay on 'Noise', submitted by a candidate in a Matriculation examination, and read aloud to the meeting after Professor Partridge had given the points of structure and style that made up the golden rule for writing an essay.

At the outset of the conference Professor Linder directed the attention of the members to the difference made to the problem of teaching English in high schools by the introduction of mass education of increasingly higher age-groups, involving the teaching of children of varying levels of intelligence and background. He wondered if a scientific study of the teaching of written composition on the lines of that on the teaching of reading should not be undertaken. It seemed that a systematic approach was very necessary.

The suggested analogy between scientific teaching of reading and of writing started the first hare, and one that might profitably have been followed further. Mr. Waldman wondered—as many English teachers do—whether this 'new' teaching of reading had produced the desired result, which was discrimination. Could those who could mechanically read, logically and artistically assess what they read: sift the true from the false, for instance in modern newspaper reporting and advertising? Would an analogous approach to teaching writing produce any better result than its counterpart in teaching reading?

The subject of the transference of the skill from reading to writing was started several times thereafter in the conference, but was never pursued. As we had before us Mr. Brian Rose's article on 'English Teaching—Contemporary Trends in England', in which the 'Use of English' paper at the G.C.E. level was discussed, this was a pity. In this 'Use of English' paper, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge test the candidate's ability by presenting facts in a certain form and asking the candidate to re-write them in another, generally giving expression to a particular point of view. This might

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have been, at any point, a profitable starting point for discussion on a directive for practical method, but it was not so used.

At this particular moment we were recalled to general principles by Mr. Weaver's question: was it function or artistic skill we were seeking to develop? Mr. O'Dowd, Education and Training Officer to the Anglo-American Corporation, said he doubted if educationists realised the importance of functional writing in the modern world. In workshops, mines, factories, language was the instrument of communication. Language was becoming increasingly important as machines increasingly took over the work of manipulation and computation. Only the man who was competent to give clear, logical instructions would have any place in the industrial and scientific world of the future. He said it was possible to teach young people to write if they were given a purpose: there was too little purpose in school writing.

This question of 'purpose' was taken up again when the controversial essay on 'Noise' was read. Mr. O'Dowd asked what 'purpose' was served by writing an essay on noise. Professor Partridge's reply, that it tested the seventeen-year-old's ability to marshall his thoughts on an abstract subject, was, for him, inadequate, since the test was, for him, an artificial one. Writing, he said, must be done for an immediate aim and particular audience, and schools sent out their pupils lamentably unable to do this kind of writing. Four months' training, he claimed, enabled them to do it. That a 'bread and butter' 'purpose' spurred the trainees to build rapidly upon the basic principles, laboriously laid down in the seemingly ineffective school curriculum, was, he later agreed, the probable cause for this.

Purposive writing naturally led back to the purpose in teaching English. Was this purpose, the opponents of purposive writing asked, merely to produce a pedestrian skill in lucid, functional English? Was it not, rather, to release the springs of joy, appreciation, artistic creation, discrimination in the pupil? Mr Waldman led this line of thought, and for a while the discussion was on drawing forth from the pupil the latent powers within him. Mr. Waldman said that all pupils had something to say if they could be got to say it, and he told of his method of sending shy pupils to an empty room, even a dark one, to voice their thoughts alone and then come back and speak them publicly. Speaking came before writing.

Mr. Philip Birkinshaw, whose sympathies were on both sides of the argument, and who read aloud the essay on 'Noise' in so persuasive a voice that, as one critic said, it seemed then to be of 80% value, agreed emphatically that speech must come before writing. It was a much neglected art today, to the great detriment of English. Children, he said, had a great appetite for words and ideas, and when they made speeches, lack of clarity or grammatical mistakes were more quickly corrected by the gentle ridicule of their contemporaries. The transition from speech to writing was a difficult one, but there again reading aloud his essay gave the pupil the opportunity of self correction. In his experience, he said, it paid to concentrate for a whole year merely on sentence structure in the essay, for the next year on paragraphing, and then in the third year on the whole structure of the work. On the other hand, spontaneity, creativity must also be taught in writing.

Miss Danckwerts voiced the reservation that so many teachers have about putting into form the spontaneous outpourings of pupils: they must be in themselves worth the time and trouble of correct phrasing. A teacher's main task, she often found, was to give to the child thoughts worthy of expression, for many children were devoid of original or critical thought; and there was always the task of making the child *want* to have such thoughts presented to him and to express them. Upon the existence of these problems there was unanimous agreement; upon their solution almost as many suggestions as members.

One felt, as speaker after speaker followed these leads, that, on the artistic side, the emphasis was, as in all art, upon the artist's (in this case the teacher's) use of his method, and not upon the method itself. To take one example from Mr. Birkinshaw's suggestions: except under the influence of a perceptive artist inspiring his pupils, classroom ridicule is not 'gentle', and the corrective acts as a vacuum seal, leaving inaccessible emptiness in the corrected one. To take another point from Miss Danckwert's remarks: the giving of worthwhile thoughts results too often in a pattern essay from the class. To stir individual artistic perception is the unteachable art of the individual teacher.

On the other side of English teaching, the functional side, much might be achieved, one feels, by compiling and issuing a manual on the skills in accepted phraseology to be attained at varying age and academic levels for specific types of writing. As long ago as 1747 Dr. Johnson said, 'The syntax of the language is too inconsistent to be reduced to rules and can only be learned by the distinct consideration of particular words as they are used by the best authors.' He gave as an example of idiom, "The soldier died *of* his wounds; the sailor perished *with* thirst,' and said, 'Every man acquainted with our language would be offended by a change of these particles.' Nowadays, 'particles' are changed and introduced with little knowledge of their effect. Ruth, 'sick *for* home amid the alien corn,' is sick

of home and wants to get away from the foreign corn. 'We met *up with* them' is common usage, while the following reflects perhaps not only a changed particle but changed social relations: a small girl with a stepfather was asked if her own father was dead: 'No,' she replied, 'My mother's just divorced to him.'

Another factor to be taken into account, here and in America, is that there are few classes composed of even a majority of children of English origin. In a class of twenty, the other day, two were of English extraction; the rest were of Greek, Portuguese, German and Afrikaans parentage. It therefore seems absolutely necessary to teach functional English, with a clear, pleasing and generally accepted idiom. Teachers may reply that this has always been part of their job. It may be, however, that our methods do not fit modern conditions. To quote Dr. Johnson again—that 'poet doomed to wake a lexicographer' — 'Commerce, however necessary, however lucrative . . . corrupts the language; they that have frequent intercourse with strangers must learn a mingled dialect . . . and the pen must at length comply with the tongue.' English, under the impact of other tongues, other cultures and new sciences, is a different language from that spoken by Johnson himself; but, as he recognised that 'tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration' and pleaded, 'Let us make some struggle for our language', so let us recognise the change that international commerce and science have made, and admit the truth of a recent article in the London 'Daily Telegraph' which summed up the situation thus: 'But the people who want English want it as 'fellow-proprietors'. They want English on their own terms, not ours. That is right and reasonable. It will be our duty first to co-ordinate the meaning and pronunciation of English, especially perhaps with our American friends.' With this aim in view, would it not be possible here in South Africa, where the influence of the second language is so apparent, to hammer out a list of essential constructions and to give examples of their use by modern authors in various fields of thought?

Mr. O'Dowd's words in the Workshop meetings were actually echoes, conscious or unconscious, of a passage from a British Ministry of Education pamphlet, 'Language—Some Suggestions for Teachers of English and Others', published in 1954. It reads: 'The scale and scope of modern industry and trade have not diminished but rather increased the importance of plain and exact communication. The speed at which business is done makes mistakes of meaning more troublesome, costly and dangerous than ever. Nor have mechanical contrivances made speech and writing any less important.... Translation, interpretation, paraphrase and summary are indispensable to modern commercial and political conferences. In science, transport and technology, though much depends on quantitative measurement and symbolic notation, the element of prose statement—explanation, directive, summary and record—cannot be eliminated. Such statements must, moreover, be exact and intelligible, to an increasing degree, to match the increasingly exact performances of the machines and the men who operate them. If this increasing complexity and refinement of performance are not answered by rising standards of plain, exact and practised expression, not only will our affairs suffer but the language itself will be debased as it struggles to perform its hopeless task. This is actually what is happening. Jargon is, to some extent, the product of haste and pressure, but it comes also from so many people having to say and write more than they have the skill to express plainly without long cogitation.'

On the last day in the Workshop, Professor Partridge drew the two halves of the circle together with his suggestions, first for the compilation of a 'Guide to Good Writing', and secondly for the points a teacher should consider in teaching essay-writing, which formed the basis of our discussion and evaluation of the essay presented to the meeting. The points covered the requirements for both literary and scientific writing. They were, first, five questions to be asked by the writer: What does the subject mean generally? What do I think about it and why? Where does the subject lead? What topic does it raise? What does the subject mean to me?; secondly, consideration of the tone or level of writing: elegant, plain or familiar, or colloquial, with advice to a child to choose the second unless the subject dictated otherwise; thirdly, instructions to be given to achieve the required style: composition must be simple but intelligible, therefore preliminary work must be done in paraphrasing and writing sentences in as many ways as possible; the golden rule—things thought of together must be mentioned together—must be observed, as cohesion is ruined by after-thoughts; movement must be achieved, by chipping away all unnecessary bits of a paragraph, and sound must be sacrificed to sense; books of varying styles must be read; the structure of the essay must be worked out with the number of paragraphs, each paragraph dealing with a distinct aspect of the subject which must be evident in that paragraph, unhindered by irrelevant notions; opening and closing phrases must receive special attention, for the opening should be arresting, the ending memorable, but neither forced; finally the length of sentences and paragraph design must be considered —graphic passages should never be prolonged— good punctuation to aid sense and point rhythm must be used—each paragraph should have a clearly mapped course and be a composition in miniature.

When, with these points as criteria, the members attempted to evaluate the essay on 'Noise', the

general views expressed on preceding days were brought into focus upon this particular piece of writing, and they illustrated the truth of Professor Partridge's preliminary remark, 'Good speaking and writing are a matter of personal prestige, What the tongue utters reflects character.' There, as a result of ten years' education, was the expression of a personality, lively in intelligence, undisciplined in expression.

It seemed to me after the conference that, in attempting that circle of perfection about the child —the circle of aesthetic appreciation, discrimination, self-expression, power of exact communication—we must visualise a circle of protection, capable of withstanding the pressure—or lack of pressure—of this space age, an age of great loneliness in the midst of an increased tempo of communication. 'The Star' of June 6th carried a report of the suicide of Horace Moulds, head of a packing department of a sugar factory in Nottingham. Unhappy at the replacement of his fifty-two packers by two giant machines, he was told he could manage the machines or take a job with less responsibility. He threw himself under a sixty miles per hour diesel locomotive. The April issue of 'Archimedes' showed the work of electronic computers with pictures of isolated human units in a world where 'machines work out operating decisions on their own and then act on them.' In an age where men on the one hand speak direct to others on the opposite side of the globe, they have on the other hand to work alone with deadly accuracy in a muted, metallic and electric world.

We, the language teachers have to equip the minds of this generation both to commune with their own hearts and be still in the knowledge that they are never less alone than when alone in the company of the immortals; and to communicate with fellow architects of this brave new world in terms that may be understood from Tokyo to Peru.



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