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LIFE AND MANAGEMENT
a critique of Britton's model of language functions.

In this brief note I wish to suggest an attitude to language and human life different from Britton's model of language functions as explicated by Hiltrud von Seydlitz in Lengwitch of September 1985.

When we in our language courses at J.C.E. speak of language functions or of language in use (using, say, the thoughts of Halliday or those of Doughty and Co.) we mean to explore language as it occurs, within experience, in response to circumstance and situation. From language so regarded, certain tentative generalizations are drawn, either for the purposes of discussion and description, or as guidelines in exploring language. This approach, like all others, must posit a theory of being.

When Britton tells us that language is a "tool", he posits the notion that human beings are tool-using creatures, i.e. that we are language-using beings. And Britton simultaneously suggests that language, as "tool", is external to us, extrinsic to what we are. This seems to mean that language has no essential significance for us as humans. Such a proposition I find unacceptable. Von Seydlitz accurately reflects Britton's managerial and instrumental attitude to language when she begins her explication of Britton's model with the words, "Language is an important tool in the creation and organisation of man's world representations...". Of course language can be a tool; of course we use language to organise the world. But these are not the central and

primal significances of language in human life.

When Rupert Birkin in Women in Love grieves over the death of his friend, he comes to the following understanding:

> The mystery of creation was fathomless, infallible, inexhaustible, for ever. Races came and went, species passed away, but ever new species arose, more lovely, or equally lovely, always unsurpassing wonder. The fountain-head was incorruptible and unsearchable. It had no limits. It could bring forth miracles, create utterly new races and new species in its own hour, new forms of consciousness, new forms of body, new units of being. To be man was a nothing compared to the possibilities of the creative mystery.[1]

In contrast to the awesome richness of life suggested here - life which is so wonderfully beyond management - the division by Britton of one of our most profound means of expression into his arbitrary and, I believe, erroneously attributed categories is sheer impertinence. A much more sensitive notion of language in human life than that is needed if we are to regard language adequately. It is interesting to note, for example, T.S. Eliot's sense that

> Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be a return to common speech.[2]

Instances of what Eliot has in mind can be found in the work of Dryden, Wordsworth, Eliot himself and, in this country, Wopko Jensma and others.

The attitude towards language which I wish to urge in place of Britton's is one which places the 'poetic' at the centre of human experience, which regards the 'poetic' as the primary impulse to linguistic expression, as the central mode in which human beings seek expression, and as the ultimate form that language takes. From the poetic other purposes, uses and functions are derived for specific ends, but these forms of language take their meaning and can only find their meaning from the base and end in the full complexity of human experience.

This is neither a mystical view of humanity nor of language. In sheer practical terms it puts at the centre of our lives the struggle into consciousness and into verbal articulation. Furthermore, it suggests that whenever linguistic possiblities with pupils are being explored, the issues cannot be addressed adequately without the inclusion of the knowledge that the whole life of each pupil is fundamentally engaged. This does not make for fraught teaching: such a view simply establishes priorities and procedures.

Use Britton's model, and one's procedures will be different. I suggest that they are likely to be linear, management-dominated and that they will relegate the poetic to the position of mere cultural adornment. And such an approach, I believe, belongs to a civilization which has failed to provide us with an adequate means to live. A focus upon living and lived language - that is, language as primarily poetic, language as it is experienced - offers opportunites for a new beginning, located in the real lives of people.

1. Lawrence D.H. 1921 Women in Love repr. 1983 Harmondsworth. Penguin:
2. The Music of Poetry in Frank Kermode ed. 1975 Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, London, Faber.