

RESEÑAS

MICK BURTON (ed.):

Enjoying Texts:

Using literary theory in the classroom

Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes (Publishers) Ltd. 1989, 125 pages

Amidst the vast production of texts for the teaching of English studies in the school and university that have irrupted onto the educational scene in the past five or so years, *Enjoying Texts* is one that manages to live up to its name.

From the attractive emblematic cover through its ten information-packed chapters, the book smacks of life: of real encounters with texts, theories, student readers, and, as a consequence, in some cases with parents! It is an intelligent and stimulating essay in bridging the gap between literary theory and classroom procedures based on the experience of eleven practising English teachers in England. Together, their articles form a casebook of creative efforts to apply theory to lower secondary, the GCSE English and sixth-form work, their advice and findings having relevance for university level also.

In general terms, *Enjoying Texts*, designed for the teacher's use, suggests various ways in to texts and to theories, and demonstrates not only that it is *possible* to demystify and use literary theory even among young students of English, but that it is actually *desirable*, and probably *necessary* to do so, if English Studies are to be both more enjoyable and more realistic and illuminating than they have been up to the post-modernist present, developing as they have been since the nineteenth century between the two extremes of the straight-jacket parsing approach to grammar on the language side, and the one-text-one-interpretation, ahistorical, messianic concept of literature as the key to life, on the other.

Among the features worth singling out is the useful glossary of post-modernist concepts mainly, aptly sub-titled 'a harvest of terms', an excellent bibliography of supplementary theoretical texts each with a brief evaluative comment, plus the powerful opening and concluding sections by the editor, Mick Burton, who is Senior Lecturer in English at Worcester College of Higher Education. The former, 'English Studies revisited', is a brief but inclusive history of the teaching of English language and literature as a subject in the school and university syllabus and an innovation to this kind of text; the latter, 'The curious English teacher's guide to modern literary theories', though not presenting anything new, is a concise panorama of literary theory from Russian formalism down to post-structuralism that clarifies without being too reductive.

The first chapter, 'English Studies revisited', should be read by all teachers of English language and/or literature, as in less than six pages it situates the changing relations between literature and language in the teaching of English Studies in England in their widest and deepest cultural contexts from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, including the different notions of religion, science, philosophy, education and class underlying these relations. The two pathways in particular to current practices in English Studies have been the cultural heritage stemming from Matthew Arnold via Leavis and his followers, and the 'language-as-baseline approach' deriving from, as Burton says, 'grinding a bastardized Latin grammar into English words, (that) becomes radically transformed through the various perspectives of progressive and language-centred practices.' The third pressure point at the time of writing the introduction is literary theory, which the book's contributors have acknowledged and converted into the strategies of classroom practice. At the beginning of the century there was deep dissatisfaction with school curricula that sprang from the radical changes in economic and social formations of the early industrial revolution. While the main thrust was towards science and technology, a focus on English literature gradually developed as a replacement for the moral function previously filled by religion. Among the various tendencies that contributed to this was the

disenchantment with the exaggerated parsing approach to language teaching which resulted in English being treated as an inferior form of Latin. The author cites David Shayer (1972), who describes the complicated and criptic grammar of Mushet's *Exercises in English* (1912) as being 'frankly nasty', as one of a growing number of writers on English teaching in the first decades of this century who began to question the value of such exercises and to offer an approach to language work based on the imagination. One such advocate, E. Holmes (1911), for example, in his attack on the Revised Code which upheld the Gradgrind approach, declared that 'as an ingenious instrument for arresting the mental growth of the child, and deadening all his higher faculties, it has never had, and I hope never will have, a rival.'

The emphasis on the individual as a creator did not enjoy universal acceptance, but it was an important stage in the development of English Studies. The famous Newbolt Report of 1921, *The Teaching of English in English*, in preferring English literature to the Classics in the curriculum, made very broad claims that were to be given further support by the work of E.R. Leavis and his followers at Cambridge in the thirties and forties. According to the report, not only could no form of literature take precedence over English literature, but good English teaching would be 'the greatest benefit which could be conferred on any citizen... and the common right to it, the common discipline and enjoyment of it, the common possession of the tastes and associations connected with it, would form a new element of national unity, linking together the mental life of all classes...'. The influence of Leavis and I.A. Richards that has been pervasive since the late fifties and has awarded a central place to English literature in education, has been supported, in the case of Richards, by the naive belief in the transparency of language which eliminates the difference between poetry and reality. The aim of Richards' ideas on language was to cultivate the minds of the readers to the right perspectives on life through reading good literature. His main legacy for the teaching of English stems from his concept of practical criticism, that close reading of words on the page which closes when the reader recreates in the process of reading 'the relevant experience of the poet when contemplating the completed composition.' This apparently harmless practice, as the editor points out, has led to the 'textual authoritarianism' under which generations of school-children have been obliged to come up with THE interpretation of a text, or be considered philistines.

The influences of Leavis and Richards became crystallized in the work of David Holbrook who, in his claims for effective English teaching, concentrated on the development of the pupil as an individual through creative expression and response. His publications such as *English for Maturity* and *English for the Rejected* offered 'an exciting and liberating approach' to teachers of English in the sixties, because he stressed the worth of the individual pupil regardless of his or her ability. Yet at the back of his theory was an elitist notion of culture inherited from Leavis and articulated by Denys Thompson who, with Leavis, wrote in 1942 in *Culture and Environment* that a citizen must be trained to discriminate and resist 'if anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be retrieved.' This moral concern for the individual was orientated towards literature. At the same time, however, there was a growing preoccupation with the educational problems of the working class brought to public notice by the Newsom Report of 1963, *Half our Future*, which identified linguistic competence as the key to educational success. Ensuing debates highlighted the differences between working and middle class language codes which put the working class to disadvantage because all schools used the middle class code. This polemic gave rise since the early sixties to the writings of James Britten, Nancy Martin and Harold Rosen, whose publications give an insight to their main concerns: *Language and Learning; Language, the Learner and the School; Writing and Learning across the Curriculum; The Development of Writing Abilities II-18; The Language and Dialects of London Schoolchildren*. As the model of language built up from many sources is dialogical, then talking and writing are seen as modes of learning, of exploratory activity, not merely reproductions of culture. By the same token, reading is a variety of texts, including media, and listening is part of the collaborative makings of meanings that a dialogic model of language implies. Literature then, is not eliminated from the program, but its parameters are widened so that the old elitist canon of Leavis and his followers can no longer hold sway. All these above-mentioned theories, says the author, have contributed in some way to the formation of the English practices of the eighties.

In isolation, this historical section, allowing the reader to see clearly the main ideological drifts that have preceded present procedures and perspectives in English Studies, is extremely valuable for the serious language and/or literature teacher wanting to understand better the deeper implications of his or her discipline. It is of special interest, too, to those who have the privilege of designing curriculum. But the chapter, 'English Studies revisited', also provides, as it is intended to do, the conceptual leaping-off point for the chapters that follow, whose general aims can be summed up by the opening remark of Paul Bench in chapter 5: 'Teasing out 'The Tyger': exploring reading strategies with second years'. Bench, a teacher of English and drama whose research has been in theoretical interpretation and the role of the reader, announces his articles in the following way: 'There is perhaps in all of us an endless yearning for static, once-and-for-all meaning.' He goes on to discuss how disturbing the act of reading can be to the reader (and the teacher!) who is fully engaged in the task. To save both pain and time there is a constant pressure on the teacher to spoonfeed. As he puts it: 'To issue notes, to throw chocolate drops of knowledge and received wisdom into the wide open mouths of calling pupils is a tempting, beckoning finger.' And when he writes of the students who have said to him: 'You are the teacher, you've studied English, and you should know the answers. Can't you just tell us what Romeo's character is like?' it was like catching the last echoes of the most recently-taught course on Shakespeare by the present reviewer! Each writer in each chapter of *Enjoying Texts* has in one way or another emerged from a common past based on the experiences (mainly frustrating) of the one-text-one-interpretation trend, to share the common and invigorating goal of really *exploring* texts by using a wide range of theories and strategies involving the students in active engagement with the text, genres, etc., to the end of discovering multiple meanings.

While each chapter is worth a close look, a few only will be chosen for their representative nature of the wide range of theory and strategies that have been translated into classroom activities with young pupils by top level teachers, whose resourcefulness and enthusiasm is implicit in their writing. Tess Collingborn in 'Enabling readers to open up texts', for example, shows the usefulness of beginning with the text-as-artefact strategy for paving the way to critical thinking and encouraging young readers to see the book as an object whose elements have been chosen by other human agents and can, therefore, be subjected to interrogation, and, ultimately, changed. Then she proceeds to focus on the reader's developing responses, drawing on the Lacanian idea of the split subject, Jakobson's 'enounced' and 'annunciation', Saussure's terminology of the signifier, the signified and the sign, and M.M. Bakhtin's assertions about the lack of neutrality in words and forms because of language being 'populated - overpopulated - with the intention of others', to stimulate students to extract meanings from Beckett's difficult text, *Endgame*. A way of drawing pupils' attention to multiple meanings or alternative interpretations is to ask them what scenes are 'missing' from the play or, in other words, to discover concealed assumptions and foreground the 'absent signifiers'. Disruptive strategies can also be employed to highlight the value of the author's choices. In the third chapter, 'GCSE post-structuralism: it can be done!', Nick Peim shows skilfully how 'in spite of the mystique of literary theory, teaching aspects of semiotics with fourth- and fifth-year classes is perfectly possible without making reference to any prohibitively difficult ideas.' He suggests that 'theoretical' terminology can be usefully introduced, illustrated, and 'handed over', simply and directly. Beginning with the traffic lights examples as a helpful model for discussing the idea of a sign system in relation to a specific cultural practice and including the toilet door example in order to introduce the 'ideologically loaded issue of gender', the analysis of signs can follow. Having established the theoretical apparatus, the 'all-language-is-sign language' concept, he moves on to some practical explorations in the 'Introducing cultural practices' section. The first exercise is to take two common signifiers and produce lists of 'signifieds' for the culturally loaded words 'man' and 'woman'. Two very useful terms, metaphor and metonymy (the twin axes of language according to Lacan's use of Jakobson) are slipped into the games following the initial exercise, to be stored for further use, development and reference. A selection of magazines, children's stories, soap operas and adverts, are examined by the children in their study of gender in those media, and communally-produced essays written before going from semiotics to deconstruction and textual analysis. Phenomenological theory, and Freud's model of the decentred self divided between conscious and unconscious experiencing, plus the Lacanian incorporation of language into this model which

emphasizes the construction of the subject and subject positions through the acquisition of language, prove both practical and palatable in work done on the play about nuclear war, *Threads*. The notion of taxonomy in relation to the question 'What kinds of fiction are there?' is the lead-in to discussion about discourse analysis in a further step of deconstruction which enabled students to see possibilities for opening up their approaches to the extended, comparative study. They were able, says the writer, to consider the differences in status between popular and canonical fictions (and) to give serious consideration to the matter of enjoying texts across a variety of kinds of fiction. Peim also documents exercises in creative writing involving 'structure boxes' and several others that serve to present the notions of stories and truth and closure in relation to narratology. All this at the secondary level of education!

Steve Bennis and Jim Porteous's step-by-step explosion of one of the long-held interpretations of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, based on the novel's 'eternal values' in favour of one involving an understanding of the way ideology and discourse are produced in literature and criticism, discovers, as an intermediary step, that among many things the novel is about writing rather than the problem of good and evil. It is another successful demonstration of theory meant to make any survivors of the Leavis and Richards school gasp. Their careful and stimulating analyses of *Wuthering Heights* and Jane Austen's *Persuasion* are both powerful arguments for the acknowledgement, exploration and understanding of social history, without which, for them, and many other readers, literature would have no meaning.

Humour, flowing from some of the very sincere and realistic reactions to traditional readings of Wordsworth's famous poem, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', on the part of young students, including one who stoutly denied that she felt lonely (and so nullifying a recognized interpretation based on the assumption of loneliness as a universal human category), shines through Paul Moran's sophisticated article, 'The materialism of 'différance'', with a diamond-like lustre and toughness. His exposition is a clever and convincing application of Jacques Derrida's theory of the radical instability of meaning, once more, as in the case of previous articles, used to undermine another 'full appreciation of the poem' concept, this time Professor Durrant's, in favour of various possibilities in accordance with the different material conditions of production. It is not often that literary criticism can produce good healthy laughter. This essay, meant for teachers of young students of English, with its lifting-the-roof-off, post-structuralist tactics, does!

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