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A contributors' guide for *The Use of English* is available from the Editors. Material should be accompanied by a stamped, addressed envelope or international reply coupons to the appropriate value. Two copies of submitted material with a disk or electronic version should be sent. Where articles are refereed, referees' comments will usually be forwarded to authors.

Three issues per year: Autumn, Spring and Summer.

£25 (\$50) individuals / £38 (\$74) institutions

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ISSN: 0042-1243

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Printed in Great Britain by Alphagraphics Ltd., Leicester



## Editorial

Ian Brinton

With the publication of an unabridged version of James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in February 1906, the two-man team of J.M. Dent (publisher) and Ernest Rhys (editor) started Everyman's Library. Dent projected a thousand volumes to be issued in lots of fifty at one shilling a volume (the price of four days of *The Times*) and they came with the inscription 'Everyman, I will go with thee & be thy guide in thy most need to go by thy side.' No wonder then that later volumes included a reference to Victor Hugo's portentous statement, 'To build a library is an act of faith' since the accumulation of all these volumes accorded with Dent's own recollection of reading when, at the age of fifteen, he had 'got up from that book feeling that there was nothing worth living for so much as literature.' With these thoughts in mind and recognising that 2006 will also be the centenary of the founding of the English Association it seemed to the editors to be of some interest to compare what early contributors to *The Use of English* had to say about such issues as Shakespeare and examinations with more recent thinking.

In his fine book on the relation between the present and the past, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal highlights some delightful absurdities about the cult of nostalgia:

Formerly confined in time and place, nostalgia today engulfs the whole past. Antique dealers have jettisoned the former 100-year-old barrier, collectors treat 1930s art deco with reverence, critics admire canonically 1950s juke-boxes... We increasingly focus on a past so recent that only an 11-year-old could possibly view it as past... Obsolescence confers instant bygone status—no sooner is the fire truck out of sight than it becomes an emblem of a vanished past. By 1980, judged Bevis Hillier, 'history was being recycled as nostalgia almost as soon as it happened.'

At the risk of indulging in a past long gone (three months ago) and bearing in mind the Dent/Rhys venture of a hundred years ago, I recall the words of Michael Morpurgo in an interview he gave in April this year. In response to the Jamie Oliver schools' dinner campaign he said:

It's easy for people to see the benefits of good food and exercise. But the benefits of books are far less obvious. Governments like things they can measure and for which they can set targets to show they are doing their job properly, so education has become ever more focused on delivering an extremely narrow set of results. Along the way, books have become marginalized—mere educational tools—and everyone from teachers to pupils has lost some of the magic of reading.

Of course, we have to ensure that everyone reaches the basic standards of reading and writing, but how are you going to achieve that without first giving children a sense of fascination and wonderment for books? That means putting books and storytelling at the heart of school life.

These sentiments echo those of David Bell, the head of Ofsted, whose speech in March, for World Book Day, suggested that reading should be about pleasure:

Reading has always been seen as a source of considerable pleasure for many. This is important, but perhaps has been forgotten by some schools in their pursuit of higher tests results that will improve their position in the league tables. You will find no pleasure in books if you cannot read, but it is equally possible to be able to read and derive little pleasure.

To look forward from here it is encouraging that QCA's English 21 venture, 'an exciting opportunity to look forward and explore potential directions for English curriculum and assessment', has been seeking the opinions of different interested groups. I think it only fair to say that our view sees the value of English for young people as lying particularly in its offering unique opportunities for the exploration of subjectivity and the development of the individual. This is as true for a school beginner at five as for a school leaver at nineteen. Joseph Mallaby Dent may have been famous for his paroxysms of rage and for being small, lame and tight-fisted but he did have what Hugh Kenner has called 'an ungovernable passion for bringing Books to the People'.

## **‘The Focus of a Humane Culture’: R.R. Pedley on Teaching and Examining English**

Adrian Barlow

**T***he Use of English* was launched as a journal for English teachers just when the School Certificate and the Higher School Certificate were being replaced by GCE O levels and A levels. Volume 1, No. 1 (1949) carried an article by R.R. Pedley attacking the new O levels in English Language and English Literature, due to be introduced in 1951. A year later, Pedley published a second article, on A level English, developing the criticisms he had made in the earlier piece and proposing a syllabus of his own as a model of what A level English should look like.

Dick Pedley was one of the early generation of English teachers to be strongly influenced by F. R. Leavis, under whom he had studied at Cambridge. He introduces the word ‘scrutiny’ into the opening sentence of his first article. Indeed, his master’s voice can be heard clearly throughout, both when Pedley attacks the then state of English studies in schools and in universities and – more positively – when he defends English as a subject designed to provide ‘a growing experience of literature and life’. Reading these articles today, at a time when the future of GCSE and A level is still (*pace* the White Paper) uncertain, offers a revealing test of how far principles and practice in English teaching and examining have actually moved in more than half a century.

Pedley begins his attack on O level by lamenting a lost opportunity:

It was to be hoped that the creation of the General Certificate of Education would involve a truly radical scrutiny of the aims and methods of public examinations. That such an inquisition has not taken place is clear from the syllabuses and arrangements for 1951 so far published .... Everything has been made easy for the schools to follow the well-trodden paths .... This complacency towards the status

quo extends from the general arrangements to the content of the actual syllabuses, which remain in all essentials what they were before. For the lack of initiative as displayed, the examining bodies cannot be held wholly or even chiefly to blame: the fault lies with a profession that ... resents change, and seems content to hug the chains forged by ignorance and vested interests and the inertia of habit.<sup>1</sup>

What Pedley dislikes most about the exams in English that were then to be introduced at 16+ is the choice of material set for précis and comprehension: 'passages of trivial subject matter – elegant fatuities in *The Times* fourth leader manner – are unworthy of serious attention and provide worthless tests of the serious candidate's ability'. He is relieved to find, however, 'a wholesome recognition of the fact that our task in "teaching composition" is not an attempt to turn out little Elias, but to equip our pupils with a technique of expression adequate to their future practical needs.' He is distrustful of what some teachers were calling flair in their 'more promising pupils ... that superficial smartness and brightness, that glib facility for saying nothing charmingly'.

What Pedley wants is an exam that will enable candidates to demonstrate 'a capacity for orderly thinking and ... an acquaintance with some of the resources of the language.' He is therefore scathing about the number of marks allotted to, and the amount of time expended on, questions of grammar, vocabulary and style:

The use and understanding of the components of the language have been (or ought to have been) tested in a real, vital context in the composition and comprehension questions. There is no correlation between the ability to do clause-analysis and the ability to compose convincing complex sentences; a child may gain high marks in a 'vocabulary' question while his operative vocabulary is revealed by his composition work to be meagre, vague and dead.

It is, though, the O level English Literature paper which most offends Pedley. He describes it as 'vicious' and condemns essay questions that 'superficially test appreciation and judgement but which in reality test the candidate's ability to memorize the stock answer which his teacher has coerced him into learning.' He sees the context-comprehension questions as merely 'an invitation to the kind of pettifogging and irrelevant textual detail associated with the name of Verity.'<sup>2</sup> He concludes, 'No wonder, therefore, that the teaching of English literature, in what for many pupils

is their last year, tends to become a merciless and indiscriminate cramming of substance and assimilation of stereotyped opinions.’

Above and beyond the papers themselves, Pedley objects to the very idea of a mass examination in English – or any subject. He resents the ‘poison the examination virus has injected into “education”’ and says that ‘only when the incubus of the present type of syllabus and paper is removed can there be any fruitful approach to English literature in the grammar school.’ He argues that there are simply too many pupils taking exams: too many candidates mean too many examiners; large panels of examiners require standardising to rigid mark schemes; standardising makes it impossible to recognize individual response, and is therefore quite inimical to the good teaching of English:

As long as an examining panel is faced with the work of 20,000 candidates there is no hope of approximation to a common standard, unless the questions are of the stereotyped variety.

He has two proposals to offer for O level: first, ‘Many of us would like to see literature papers consist almost entirely of passages for comprehension and comment, the preparation for which would involve the reading of a variety of texts but not the present mass-mastication of indigestible fragments. Such questions and such a syllabus might afford an opportunity of testing genuine reading capacity and not the parrot’s repetitive ability.’ Secondly, Pedley simply hopes that schools will discourage pupils from entering English Literature O level at all:

That minority of children specially suited for a specialist study of literature would then be able to take papers at ‘Advanced level’; and the others – the majority – would find in a wisely planned literature syllabus a stimulus and a profit the present mass-production methods based on unworthy incentives make impossible. If teachers of English can teach literature only when prodded by Certificate requirements, then indeed the case is hopeless.’

One imagines that today Pedley (who was an outspoken defender of grammar schools and a contributor to the Black Papers on Education) would treat such ideas as ‘access’ and ‘inclusivity’ with contempt. Indeed, with his use of terms such as ‘mass-mastication’ and ‘mass-production’ he echoes Leavis’s horror at what he called the ‘technico-Benthamite revolution’. It was precisely the apparent élitism and exclusiveness underlying Leavis’s call for the centrality of English that made the later

reaction against the *Scrutiny* School so violent. Yet for Pedley, as for Leavis, this was a crusade that needed fighting:

Unless enough of us can convince authority of the evils of the present English papers, the General Certificate of Education will for the mass of pupils remain as pernicious an impediment to intellectual and spiritual health as its predecessor.

Here perhaps Pedley's approach to the question of how English should be taught and examined at 16+ is ambivalent: when he refers to the mass of pupils, he is actually excluding the fortunate minority who, under his proposal, would go straight on to Advanced level courses. In this he anticipates one of the recent Tomlinson proposals, which recommended that bright pupils should be allowed to take GCSEs early or to skip them altogether, going straight on to advanced (level 3) study. Pedley would certainly have welcomed the Tomlinson objective to reduce the significance of GCSE as a terminal examination.

Pedley's second article appeared in *The Use of English* the following year.<sup>3</sup> At the time he was writing, the syllabuses for A level English had not yet been published, so his comments were all based on the state of post-16 English studies as exemplified by the 1950 Higher School Certificate. He felt slightly, but only slightly, more optimistic about the prospects for the new exam, mainly because the numbers of candidates entering would be only one tenth of those taking O level:

The smaller the number of examiners required, the greater the likelihood of appointing people sufficiently well qualified to be trusted to apply individually sensitive and intelligent standards. It is impossible to expect such standards from the huge panels of sweated labour that mark the S.C. [School Certificate] papers.

Pedley is reassured, up to a point, by the fact that 'most authorities' [*sc.* the exam boards<sup>4</sup>] now insist on comprehension and practical criticism questions. He is confident that 'such questions, inviting a training in the close scrutiny of the written word, must have a beneficial effect on sixth form studies – besides acting as a better test of reading capacity than the stock examination question which can be swotted up.' He is, however, irritated that the HSC practical criticism papers often show 'fumbling and timidity' on the part of the examiners. Specifically, he objects that 'candidates are not invited to diagnose the shoddy argument, the faked emotion or the meretricious appeal.' Indeed, to his surprise, some

examiners 'shy entirely away from demanding value-judgments; others may ask for comparative evaluations but choose passages remote from the students' probable experience of literature and life and certainly remote from the contemporary world.'

It is worth noting here how Pedley again follows Leavis in insisting that 'literature' should not be divorced from 'life' (Leavis had famously declared, 'I don't believe in any "literary" values ... the judgments the literary critic is concerned with are judgments about life. What the critical discipline is concerned with is relevance and precision in making and developing them.'): He objects strongly to the type of practical criticism exam which is 'too "literary", a sterile academic exercise making no call on the pupil's sensibility or growing experience of literature and life'.

To counter this 'sterile' approach, Pedley had himself been instrumental in setting up a project called *Criticism in Practice* at the time *The Use of English* was founded: on a termly basis, the project was to publish a series of pairs of texts, where one of each pair was deemed to be 'good' and the other 'bad'. Participating sixth-form teachers would use these pairs of texts in class and later send in summaries of the discussions they had had, showing how their students had come to discriminate between the passages or texts. These would then be published with the next set of pairs in the series. For Pedley, such an approach was designed to 'encourage that respect for literature which unthinking courses in practical criticism sometimes replace by cocksureness and flippancy ... [I]t is a first necessity that the English specialist should be helped to equip himself with the means of discrimination, and experienced in samples of the situations with which he is confronted in his daily life.' This agenda, of course, had underpinned such books as Denys Thompson's *Reading and Discrimination* (1934).

The situations Pedley is referring to are, specifically, encounters with the language of advertising and mass communication: later in the article he proposes a Practical Criticism paper which would include:

a series of short passages in which language is used for varying purposes – referential, emotive, emotive-masquerading-as-referential (*'Beer is best'*). Candidates would be asked to compare the methods and effects of the techniques employed.

Here Pedley is describing the type of question and type of approach that has more recently characterised integrated Language and Literature papers, both before and since Curriculum 2000 created a free-standing

subject ('English Language and Literature') distinct from either English Literature or English Language. For him the distinction to be drawn is not between literary and non-literary texts, but between writing which is 'clear and honest' and writing that is 'shoddy and bogus'. What Pedley hopes is that such questions will render 'comprehension' exercises at A level redundant:

No specific 'comprehension' question would be necessary: the candidate's understanding would be fully shown in his practical criticism. Such a paper would at least help and not hinder a training in taste.

From such comments as these it is possible to identify Pedley's own sense of what English studies in the sixth form should be about and his conception of how they should be examined. At the end of his article he defines 'the essential task of the examiner' as being

to promote a willing and responsive submission to the disciplines of literature and to encourage the pupil to equip himself with techniques rather than to bloat himself with information.

He believes that the disciplines of literature should 'foster the notion of tradition and development' but finds that 'the differences in orientation' adopted by the various exam boards 'betray only too clearly those differences of opinion between the Universities' conception of "English" that so often bewilder and alarm the potential English student'. For this reason he is scathing both of the Shakespeare papers which fail to 'direct any attention to the play as a dramatic poem'<sup>6</sup> and of the Prescribed Books papers:

The questions in this paper make quite clear that the examiners regard each set book as an isolated text .... We are still in the S.C. set-book world: all the candidate needs is a full factual knowledge of his books and the ability to reproduce rapidly the stock answers forced into him by the question-spotter.

It is interesting that Pedley has such an aversion to the idea of the isolated text. Some teachers have recently regretted the loss of opportunity for wider reading in an introductory Lower Sixth course, a loss forced on them by the arrival of compulsory AS units in Year 12 of Curriculum 2000;<sup>7</sup> but few want to abandon altogether the detailed study of individual

texts as the distinctive focus of A level English Literature. For students, it is precisely the process of learning to study a text in depth and to ‘possess’ that text by getting to know it so well which is often the most rewarding aspect of English Literature in the sixth form and the essential preparation for going on to read English at university. Students who have not learnt the techniques of close textual study before the start of a degree course are unlikely to have assimilated them by the end of it. Many teachers will agree with J Hillis Miller that you cannot be an effective fast reader if you do not also learn to read slowly.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, of course, the study of English – both at school and at university – needs to combine close study and wider reading. Pedley is right that wide reading is an essential preparation for the kind of independent response to literature which teachers (now as in 1950) want to foster and examiners want to reward. However, an important recent Report from the English Subject Centre<sup>9</sup> on the transition from studying English at A level to reading English at university identifies close reading as the central skill that students need to bring from A level when they begin their degree courses; but, in the same report, university teachers identify it as the skill most lacking in students beginning such courses.

Now that reform of the Curriculum 2000 Subject Criteria has become an urgent necessity, given the White Paper’s timetable for restructuring A level and QCA’s English 21 consultation,<sup>10</sup> it is important to ask whether the AS + A2 structure and the current assessment objectives for Literature have contributed to this perceived decline in close reading skills. It is also important to ask how far close reading skills, these days increasingly defined in terms of critical literacy, relate to the concept of ‘close scrutiny of the written word’ as defined and approved by Pedley. The recent Report from the National Association of Teachers of English (NATE), *text: message...The Future of A level English*,<sup>11</sup> repeatedly condemns what it calls the ‘inexplicit approaches of Practical Criticism’ and calls for ‘a well-structured programme in which the study of texts (often comparative) is placed firmly in the context of the study of language, genre, narrative, representation, culture and interpretation’. Most Literature teachers today occupy the middle ground between Pedley’s position and that defined by NATE. Elaine Showalter, in *Teaching Literature*, describes the situation clearly – though it is doubtful whether Pedley would have agreed that close reading could or should ever be neutral:

The close reading process, or *explication de texte*, that we use in analysing literary texts does not have to come with the ponderous baggage of the New Criticism, or with political

labels. Before or along with attention to factors outside the text, students have to understand something about the verbal, formal and structural elements of the words themselves. Close reading can be a neutral first step in understanding literature.<sup>12</sup>

Faced, then, in 1950 with the imposition of a new examination too much like the discredited Higher School Certificate in English, Pedley decided to make a pre-emptive strike by outlining his own proposal for an A level course. He envisaged a three-paper examination for English, with the Practical Criticism paper being 'of central importance: I should insist that no candidate with insufficient marks on it could gain a pass in English'. This was to be a three-hour paper, containing short passages 'in which language is used for varying purposes', followed by comparative questions focusing on poetry and prose. Candidates would be challenged to discriminate between writing which showed 'a genuine response to a situation' and that which betrayed the 'faking of emotion, cheap wit or beauty-mongering associated with the best seller'. Here Pedley was certainly advocating a critical literacy, but one focused on individual aesthetic and moral evaluation rather than one located in social and ideological analysis.

Pedley's second paper would deal only with Shakespeare. Instead, however, of the detailed study of two or three plays, he envisaged that students would encounter as many as seven or eight 'in order to present a conspectus of Shakespearean development'. There would be passages for paraphrase, taken from the plays suggested for study, but these could be 'treated as Unseen passages' – in other words no attempt at contextualising the passages would be required. The essay questions would not be directed at individual plays or characters but at broader themes such as 'Shakespeare and kingship', 'the tragedies as expanded metaphors' or 'The Shakespearean ethic and its realization'. Questions of this kind would be, in Pedley's view, 'a test of genuine (if elementary) research into and understanding of the dramatist, not an invitation to regurgitate spoon-fed information or a test of a non-comprehending memory.'

Pedley was well ahead of his time in advocating open-book examinations: he would have liked candidates to be able to take the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* into the exam: 'While mere memory work would be at a discount so too would mere facility; the examiner would look for adequate knowledge to support the grasp of the relevant techniques he is especially testing.' It was the advocacy of teachers such as Pedley which led to the introduction of the Cambridge Plain Texts examination in 1966; and it

ironic that this development, which led in turn to open book examinations at A level, may now - forty years on - be threatened by a return to a completely closed-book policy in the next round of QCA General and Subject Criteria revisions.

Another of Pedley's forward-looking proposals was the introduction of coursework as an alternative to his third paper, for which 'the first essential is flexibility'. Again, he did not want students to study isolated set texts; instead he advocated 'various alternative but coherent courses of study ... a choice of periods, a choice of authors, a choice perhaps of topics ('Comedy', 'The Novel', 'Poetic Drama' ...)' Although reading lists would be recommended, 'there would be no hint of compelling candidates to read a small set of books'. He was confident that 'the examiner, of course, would detect and penalize the mere student of "Histories of English Literature"; a first hand knowledge of books relevant to the chosen topic would be essential.' As an alternative to this paper, Pedley saw no reason not to allow candidates to 'submit a thesis of given minimum length on an agreed topic: many excellent students would not give of their best even in the enlightened paper suggested.'

This 'enlightened' paper sounds similar to some synoptic papers offered by today's awarding bodies, and actually describes precisely the 'Topic Paper' of certain previous syllabuses. It also precisely anticipates one of the favoured approaches of the NATE Report.<sup>13</sup> It is ironic that the White Paper may spell the end for coursework, for which Pedley was such a firm advocate: from now on coursework will explicitly not be allowed as an option against a written paper: coursework 'is not favoured where its primary purpose is to assess knowledge and skills which can equally well be assessed in other ways' (14-19 *White Paper*, 2005, 8.2).

From today's perspective, Pedley's criticisms of examinations and examiners are instructive. He dislikes any form of memory test ('which is the only policy all examiners share'); he condemns teachers who would rather 'work through' a 'matriculation English' handbook 'than grapple seriously with training in expression or understanding'. He chafes at the limits of what literature papers can achieve:

The kind of question which might genuinely test the child's reading capacity or awareness of literature cannot be set, because it cannot be marked to a standardized marking scheme.

In fact, he dislikes the whole apparatus of assessment, what he calls the 'mechanics of examining: standardizing, "objectivity", statistics', and

would prefer to rely simply on a small group of experts ‘sufficiently well qualified to be trusted to apply individually sensitive and intelligent standards’. Pedley’s view of examining was frankly unrealistic in 1950; it is untenable today. He admits that ‘We all know the wide variation of individual appraisal that occurs in the marking of essays,’ and acknowledges that ‘No dozen teachers would agree on what constitutes “suitable” texts’. This being so, no examination could conceivably be reliable if there were no process by which examiners (nearly all of whom are, after all, full-time or retired teachers themselves) could mark to an agreed standard. In his first article he acknowledges but does not confront ‘the crucial problem of setting markable questions and marking them’.

The tension between teaching and examining English that existed for Pedley in 1950 remains today. Teachers work from specifications designed to accommodate the whole ability range, encouraging each individual pupil to strive for his or her best result (quality); examiners work from the same specifications, aiming to ensure fairness for all (equity). This is an age when politicians use public examinations to measure national standards; when Ofsted, parents and the media use league tables to measure standards in schools, and when Heads use exam results to measure (and reward) the performance of teachers. These are not the purposes for which GCSEs and A levels were designed. What public examination system could guarantee always to meet not only these requirements but also, in Pedley’s phrase, the ‘needs of individual candidates’? Is it surprising that sometimes quality and equity appear to be at odds?

Admitting that his own proposed syllabus is ‘Utopian’, Pedley actually imagines a teaching and examining utopia in which only students who ‘have the interest and the bent’ would take Advanced level English. He explicitly ignores the rest: ‘I am not interested (here) in the pupil who takes English literature as a *pis aller*.’ Essentially, what he is proposing is an examination for potential university entrants, to be set and marked by actual university teachers. This is clear when he says: ‘It is worth repeating that the examiner is not wholly or perhaps even chiefly to blame. He reflects both the ideas of his University and what he senses of the ideas of the schools.’

Perhaps no shift in assessment post-16 has been more marked between Pedley’s time and today. In 1950 A levels syllabuses were being devised by academics working for university examinations boards; papers were to be set by them and candidates examined by them. Today there is only one UK awarding body (OCR, part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) still attached to a university, and the number of

university teachers who still examine at A level (never mind at GCSE) in any subject is almost zero.

There is a major issue here. On the one hand, academics rightly point out that they are now so much more pressurised by the demands of their own institutions and by the burden of the R.A.E. They simply do not have the time to commit to A level examining as well – never mind that AS and A levels have crept ever earlier and now impinge directly on university terms rather than the long vacations. On the other hand, since control of A levels has passed out of the hands of the universities and into the hands of the regulatory authority, QCA, Higher Education feels it no longer has a stake in the exams and resents its lack of involvement.<sup>14</sup> This in turn begs the question, who ‘owns’ English as a subject – schools or Higher Education? How far it is appropriate to assume that the way English Studies are taught in university English departments should determine the focus of English teaching in sixth forms and below?

Back in 1950, Pedley condemned what he saw as the ‘muddleheadedness on the part of all those concerned with English studies’. He believed that the syllabuses then on offer merely illustrated ‘the confusion resulting from the lack of coherent purpose’ exemplified by the lack of consistency between university English courses. To counter this, he proposed his own aims for A level English, envisaging a subject tailored to the needs of schools, not universities. His English would foster ‘the growth of self-reliant critical taste’ and help to equip the student with ‘the means of discrimination’. Above all, perhaps, he wanted to encourage the idea of literature as ‘organic growth’, not to be divorced from life: literature – as he saw it - provided a test for the qualities of clarity, honesty and genuineness which students needed in their daily lives.

It is revealing to set this view of the subject English from 1950 against the descriptions of English Literature in 2005 provided by the writers of the NATE Report. Pedley might have found himself (perhaps to his surprise) agreeing with some of NATE’s criticisms - for instance, that

the traditional emphasis on the atomistic study of individual texts continues to dominate the course, with the texts themselves (rather than literary ideas illuminated and exemplified by texts) as the central focus.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand he might have been puzzled, to say the least, by NATE’s frustration that English Literature, as represented in Curriculum 2000, ‘does not position itself explicitly in relation to the aesthetic, cultural and linguistic pluralism of a society in which students – and teachers –

have to negotiate a cultural landscape more complex than that suggested by the course as it stands'.<sup>16</sup>

Since 1988, NATE has consistently argued that 'to insist that students see literature as the central and superior form of cultural production is simply to delude them and to stifle the interaction between their study of literature, their own cultural formation, and their understanding of contemporary society'.<sup>17</sup> In the final paragraph of its Report, NATE now looks forward to

a post-16 English that will seek to examine the function of language in society by studying specific discourse forms: speech, written language (including literature), and other media. It will examine these not as isolated texts (conversations, novels, films) but in relation to the social and historical world within which they are utterances in the continuing human conversation.<sup>18</sup>

This is one possible orientation of the subject: English as a social science. Dick Pedley\* by contrast saw English studies as 'the focus of a humane culture' with literature at the centre of those studies. His concern was with 'the needs of individual candidates' studying, and being examined in, English. As the profession contemplates yet another round of Subject Criteria revision at both GCSE and A level it is worth asking which of these directions in English studies is likely to prove the more motivating and rewarding for students (all of them, not just Pedley's élite) and for teachers alike.

\*R.R. (Dick) Pedley read English at Downing College, Cambridge (1930 - 34) under F.R. Leavis. He was Head of English at City of Leicester Boys' School and at St Olave's London before becoming Headmaster first of Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School and then of St Dunstan's College. A leading opponent of the introduction of comprehensive schools and a contributor to the Black Papers on Education, he should not be confused with W.R.R. (Robin) Pedley, his contemporary at Leicester who lectured in the University's Education Department and wrote a best selling Penguin Education book defending the comprehensive system. Dick Pedley died in 1973.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> R.R. Pedley, 'English in Exams: 1 – The General Certificate', *The Use of English* 1.i 1949/50 Autumn, pp.35 – 39.
- <sup>2</sup> A W Verity was a Victorian editor of widely-used school Shakespeare texts, some of which are still in print.
- <sup>3</sup> R.R. Pedley, 'English in Examinations: II The "Advanced" level', *The Use of English* 2.ii, Winter 1950, pp. 69 – 74. Reprinted below, pp. 18 - 23.
- <sup>4</sup> At this time the boards were all controlled by universities - hence the Oxford Delegacy, the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, the University of London Examinations and Assessment Board, the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, the Northern Universities Joint Board (based at Manchester) and the Southern Universities Joint Board (based at Bristol)
- <sup>5</sup> F.R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword*, 1972, p.79.
- <sup>6</sup> Here Pedley follows L.C. Knights, another member of Leavis's *Scrutiny* circle, who in an essay 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?' (in *Explorations*, 1946, p.18) had argued that "The only profitable approach to Shakespeare is a consideration of his plays as dramatic poems, of his use of language to obtain a total complex emotional response."
- <sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Neil King's letter in *The Use of English*, vol.20, no.56, Spring 2005, p.148.
- <sup>8</sup> See Hillis Miller's discussion of reading 'allegro' and 'lente' in *On Literature* (2002) pp. 122-126.
- <sup>9</sup> Andrew Green, *Four Perspectives on Transition*, English Subject Centre, 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> See Adrian Barlow, 'The White Paper and its Implications for English', *English Association Newsletter*, No 178, Spring 2005, pp. 3-8.
- <sup>11</sup> Hodgson *et al* (eds.) *text : message The Future of A Level English*, NATE, 2005. cf. for instance pp. 28-29, where the Report's authors single out for praise the approaches to close reading implicit in the syllabuses of the International Baccalaureat and the Australian (Victorian State) Certificate of Education.
- <sup>12</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature*, 2003, p.56.
- <sup>13</sup> *text : message*, Section 4.5, p.29.
- <sup>14</sup> cf Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours, *Beyond A Levels: Curriculum 2000 and the Reform of 14-19 Qualifications*, 2003, pp. 139-145.
- <sup>15</sup> *text : message*, 2.2, p.9.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 4.2, p.24.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, Conclusion, p.45.

## English in Examinations: II The 'Advanced' Level

R.R. Pedley

It must be said at once that the worst features of the mass-examination system are not present in what we have known as the Higher School Certificate. This is, of course, because the number taking the later examination is so much smaller. In 1949, for example, over 26,000 candidates took the English Literature School Certificate paper of one of the biggest authorities, but only 2,600 took the Higher School Certificate in English. The smaller the panel of examiners, the less need should there be for stereotyped questions to be marked by standardized marking schemes, and the greater the opportunity for considering the needs of individual candidates.

The smaller the number of examiners required, the greater the likelihood of appointing people sufficiently well qualified to be trusted to apply individually sensitive and intelligent standards. It is impossible to expect such standards from the huge panels of sweated labour that mark the S.C. papers.

There have, in fact, been welcome signs in recent years that examining authorities have taken notice of present trends of English teaching. Most authorities now devote a paper or part of a paper to some sort of comprehension and practical criticism. The presence of such questions, inviting a training in the close scrutiny of the written word, must have a beneficial effect on sixth form studies – besides acting as a better test of reading capacity than the stock essay question which can be swotted up. But one has the impression that the examiners – like many of our colleagues – are either only half-convinced of the usefulness of such work or else uncertain of both purpose and method. Too many of the comprehension passages are of mediocre quality and fail to justify the serious attention they ostensibly invite. Many of them are fundamentally pointless – however many 'markable points' may be elucidated. Frequently questions on verse are directed to minor points of 'form' and 'technique' ('What is the name of the verse-form here employed?'). There is a fumbling and timidity, too, in the 'practical criticism' exercises. Some examiners shy entirely away from demanding value-judgments; others may ask for comparative evaluations but choose passages remote from the

students' probable experience of literature and life and certainly remote from the contemporary world. The attitudes encouraged by *Criticism in Practice* find no stimulus in H.S.C. papers: candidates are not invited to diagnose the shoddy argument, the faked emotion or the meretricious appeal. One often finds, therefore, that the Science Sixth are readier to detect the bogus than the academically bred English specialists.

I do not, of course, ask that bad passages should monopolize the practical criticism questions. It is just as important for the growth of self-reliant critical taste to appreciate the good as it is to diagnose the bad. One wants, too, to encourage that respect for literature which unthinking courses in practical criticism sometimes replace by cocksureness and flippancy. But it is a first necessity that the English specialist should be helped to equip himself with the means of discrimination, and experienced in samples of the situations with which he is confronted in his daily life. Too many pupils are merely provided with sets of second-hand judgments derived from a History of Literature. Practical criticism in the examinations (like much else there) is too 'literary', a sterile academic exercise making no call on the pupil's sensibility or growing experience of literature and life.

It is not only academic sterility which dismays us when we consider the rest of the papers. What they seem distressingly to evince is an apparent basic uncertainty of policy and purpose. There are signs of piecemeal submissions to various pressures – like the half-hearted attempt to provide practical criticism discussed above; there are signs of the persistence into the H.S.C. papers of the preconceptions about 'English' of the different Universities that father them, but of any clearly thought-out policy whereby the H.S.C. might have encouraged fruitful sixth form studies there is no sign whatsoever. One expects divergences between the examining bodies yet the differences in orientation betray only too clearly those differences of opinion between the Universities' conception of 'English' that so often bewilder and alarm the potential English student. One body, for instance, makes Chaucer compulsory, insists on Chaucer paraphrase and on the importance of grammar; another makes him optional and has no translation paper; one makes it necessary to choose set books all from one period, another presents a set of quite unrelated texts; one sets two papers, another three, and so on. It is often therefore geography rather than the teacher's or the pupil's wishes that dictate the direction of sixth form work. And while it may be said that a school may easily change its examining body, the demands of other subjects may make a change impracticable. Moreover, there is at the moment no examining authority whose syllabus or papers could be recommended. They all illustrate the confusion relating from the lack of coherent purpose, a lack for which the examiners are by no means solely responsible.

What, apart from the reproduction of information and stock answers, is the purpose of the Shakespeare paper? Some authorities fail, in fact, to give him a paper to himself but crowd him in with Chaucer or in one instance with Chaucer-or-Milton and comprehension-practical criticism as well! One would have thought that by any standards it would have appeared absurd to force the candidate through three paraphrases and two essay-questions on Shakespeare, an essay on Chaucer-or-Milton and then expect considered comments on lengthy passages of prose and verse. With all examiners, however, the Shakespeare questions are on only too familiar lines: firstly, paraphrases with 'context', comprehension and 'critical' questions attached; secondly, essay questions of the stock type – the experienced teacher will have been 'over' most of them:

*'Hamlet's character is thrown into greater relief by the characters of Laertes, Horatio and Fortinbras.' Discuss*

*What is the function of the Fool in 'King Lear'?*

*Point out in 'The Winter's Tale' those features of dramatic art which are characteristic of Shakespeare's latest period.*

*Show how far and by what means Shakespeare causes us to sympathize with either Antony or Cleopatra.*

Apart from their stereotyped nature few of the questions direct any attention to the play as a dramatic poem. Dowden, Verity, Aldis Wright, Bradley remain the source books for answers. The paraphrase-context questions certainly encourage a detailed attention to the text, but it is often the wrong kind of attention – to what one examiner calls 'verbal difficulties', i.e. those trivial examples of obsolete words or topical allusions for which a good memory of notes suffices. Even though candidates may be invited to discuss points of 'literary and dramatic interest' nothing but superficialities can be expected, for it is these unfortunates who have to rush on to Chaucer and practical criticism.

But it is in what is most often called the Prescribed Books paper that the lack of purposeful policy is most acute. Those authorities which make the candidates choose texts from a period certainly give more opportunity of developing an idea of literature as organic growth than those which present a list of unrelated texts. In theory it would be possible to use the most significant of these texts to foster the notion of tradition and development or to use the chosen texts as 'nucleus' books from which wider studies could develop. But in fact the book offered so often contain works of merely marginal interest (*Childe Harold, Journey to the Western Islands, Redgauntlet*) or works of (to say the least) qualified merit (*She Stoops to Conquer, Essays of Elia*) that to plan a coherent course or a course worth

doing is almost impossible. Muddle-headedness in setting this paper is shown particularly by the setting of books of the Authorized Version, for while no one would query its great literary and cultural importance, it can surely be studied adequately only if the religious and theological implications of the text are considered. To regard it as merely a work of 'literary' interest tends to perpetuate that idea of divorce between content and form so fatal to any genuine study of literature. Twentieth century texts are often chosen, but this apparent concession to those who think literature is a living growth is stultified by the choice of only those authors and books considered academically 'safe' – Shaw, Galsworthy, Bridges. Eliot gets in – he is now respectable – but only with *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The questions in this paper make quite clear that the examiners regard each set book as an isolated text. They range from the purely factual (*Summarize Sidney's arguments . . . Set out briefly the views on the value of rhyme in dramatic poetry discussed in Dryden's Essay*) through the stereotyped (*Wordsworth is pre-eminently the interpreter of Nature to man.* Discuss; *In Samson Agonistes there is an effective blend of Hellenic and Hebraic elements.* Discuss) to the would-be direct invitation to 'original' and 'individual' (*From which of the poets Wordsworth, Shelley or Keats have you derived most pleasure in your reading of the anthology and why? What in your view makes Wordsworth a great poet? What is your interpretation of the drama which Eliot weaves round the murder in the cathedral?* – where 'drama' may be read in the evening paper sense: 'Drama at Lake Success'). We are still in the S.C. set-book world: all the candidate needs is a full factual knowledge of his books and the ability to reproduce rapidly the stock answers forced into him by the question-spotter.

If all the examiners want is a rough order of merit of the candidates it may not matter much what books are prescribed or what questions are set. Unfortunately what the examiner does is bound very largely to condition what schools do. It is worth repeating that the examiner is not wholly or perhaps even chiefly to blame. He reflects both the ideas of his University and what he senses of the ideas of the schools. 'He' is often a Board on which teachers serve. What therefore appears muddleheaded in his policy is a reflection of muddleheadedness on the part of all those concerned with English studies. We must not abuse the examiner unless we have in our minds a clear conception of the purpose which Advanced papers in English should help to promote.

It is tempting to leave the matter here with the weaknesses of the present system exposed and the major questions unanswered. But in order – I hope – to provoke that fruitful controversy out of which progress may spring, I risk some concrete suggestions for the Advanced syllabuses and papers of the future.

I start from the assumption that Advanced students of English – as of Physics or of Greek – are specially suited for such studies. They have the interest and the bent (in the jargon, the aptitude and ability). I need therefore make no attempt to seduce the unwilling or compromise with the unsuitable. I am not interested (here) in the pupil who takes English literature as a *pis aller*. First, I must devise a paper which will stimulate a profitably close attention to the written word, a concentration on the real ‘minute particulars’ of literature and foster a qualitative awareness. My criticism paper will be of vital importance: I should insist that no candidate with insufficient marks on it could gain a pass in English. At least three hours would be given to the paper with perhaps additional time for the task of reading through what will inevitably be a long paper. The exercises would include: (i) a series of short passages in which language is used for varying purposes – referential, emotive, emotive-masquerading-as-referential (*Beer is best*). Candidates would be asked to compare the methods and effects of the techniques employed; (ii) two passages of verse, one better than the other for comparative assessment (questions might direct attention to important points – not trivial pseudo-technical irrelevancies – in the manner of the first Use of English *Criticism in Practice* sheet); (iii) two passages of prose to be treated similarly. The passages might be either ratiocinative or expository with one clear and honest and the other shoddy and bogus, or descriptive-narrative with one showing a genuine response to a situation and the other the faking of emotion, cheap wit or beauty-mongering associated with the best-seller; - or both, the candidate being allowed to choose which exercise he attempted. No specific ‘comprehension’ question would be necessary: the candidate’s understanding would be fully shown in his practical criticism. Such a paper would at least help and not hinder a training in taste.

A total of three papers is essential. The folly of huddling all the work into two has been sufficiently indicated above. My second paper will concern itself with Shakespeare – but the syllabus will not confine itself to the remorseless plugging of two or three set plays. Seven or eight plays will be suggested in order to present a conspectus of Shakespearian development; candidates will be warned that they will be expected to show ability to read Shakespeare by paraphrasing or analysing passages taken from the plays mentioned but which can be treated as Unseen passages; a number of optional topics would be given (dealing with Shakespeare not with Cleopatra or Falstaff), e.g. ‘Shakespeare and kingship’, ‘Use of Elizabethan stage-conventions’, ‘Shakespearean imagery and movement’, ‘The tragedies as expanded metaphors’, ‘The Shakespearean ethic and its realization’ . . . The examination would, apart from the paraphrase and comment passages, consist of questions based on one or more of these

topics and would therefore be a test of genuine (if elementary) research into and understanding of the dramatist, not an invitation to regurgitate spoon-fed information of a test of non-comprehending memory. It is a pity that difficulties of invigilation might make it impracticable for candidates to be allowed to bring the Complete Works into the examination. While mere memory work would be at a discount so too would mere facility; the examiner would look for adequate knowledge to support the grasp of the relevant techniques he is especially testing.

The first essential of Paper III is flexibility. Various alternative but coherent courses of study would be offered: a choice of periods, a choice of authors, a choice perhaps of topics ('Comedy', 'The Novel', 'Poetic Drama' . . .). A large number of relevant texts would be suggested, but there would be no hint of compelling candidates to read a small set of books. Questions would be general: again, a test of fruitful research into what at this stage must be a limited field. The essential task of the examiner is to promote a willing and responsive submission to the disciplines of literature and to encourage the pupil to equip himself with techniques rather than to bloat himself with information. One or two questions would suffice – the present scramble to write five essays in three hours seems little more than a test of manual stamina and journalistic slickness. The examiner, of course, would detect and penalize the mere student of 'Histories of English Literature'; a first-hand knowledge of books relevant to the chosen topic would be essential. As an alternative to this paper, it should be possible to allow the candidate to submit a thesis of given minimum length on an agreed topic: many excellent students would not give their best even in the enlightened paper suggested.

If these proposals are considered Utopian they may at least stimulate a desire to re-think assumptions and objectives. There can surely be no defence of the present obsession with memory-work which appears to be the only policy all examiners share. And what must be discarded is the preoccupation with the mechanics of examining: standardizing, 'objectivity', statistics – which run the risk of dehumanizing those very studies which should be the focus of a humane culture. If the teacher allows himself to be the mere servant of the machine he has only himself to thank for a mechanical examination. It is our responsibility to convince the Universities that the present examinations cannot serve those ultimate ends in which, we are sure, they, like us, believe.

Reproduced from: *The Use of English*, Volume 2.1, Winter 1950, pp. 69-74

## ***Not of an age, but for all time?***

# **The Changing Face of Shakespeare in School**

Jenny Stevens

The arrival through the post of L. G. Salingar's article on teaching Shakespeare to a post-war generation of Grammar School boys coincided with my reading of a book published fifty years later: Bethan Marshall's *English Teachers – The Unofficial Guide*. The most compelling part of Marshall's thought-provoking study is that entitled 'A Rough Guide to English Teachers'. Forming the basis of the author's research, this section offers five broad views of the teaching of English with which those taking part in the project were asked to align themselves. The juxtaposition of the writings of Salingar and Marshall raised the inevitable question: would a Grammar School master of the late-1940s still find a place in the modern-day educationalist's classifications of the English teacher? The question seemed to find an answer with surprising speed, as Salingar fitted, without too much forcing, into the profile of Group A:

This group are Arnoldian in their view of the subject. They believe in the improving and civilising qualities of literature...And perhaps most importantly they are about developing an aesthetic sensibility.<sup>1</sup>

Viewed in this light, Salingar's article appeared to be more than an historical document, offering a tantalisingly brief view of the English teacher of the past. Rather, it conveyed attitudes and beliefs which still inhere in a substantial proportion of the profession, a continuity of teacher-type which could either be regarded as evidence of unhealthy ossification, or as confirming a certain 'essence' of English teaching which is destined to endure.

Even the most cursory reading of Salingar's piece reveals certain values and priorities with which the vast majority of English teachers would feel an affinity: the study of Shakespeare should result in 'immediate

enjoyment', as well as contributing to a more long-term development of mature understanding; it should promote in the student 'not a passive but an active process of the mind'; it should involve a variety of media, with students leaving school having 'read, taken part in, or watched on a stage or screen anything from two or three of the plays to ten'. While we may reel at the idea of our current students clocking up ten plays in an increasingly crowded school curriculum, there is nothing here which seems outmoded or, indeed, undesirable. Moreover, if we follow the critical practice of today and place Salingar in his historical, social, and cultural contexts, he moves at once from Bethan Marshall's old-school Group A to the much more exciting Group E: the rebel. In dismissing rote-learning for the purposes of recitation as pointless, extolling the virtues of digression – albeit 'judicious' digression – for the learning process, and stressing the importance of the students' direct engagement with the text, Salingar may well have been one of the 'trendy' English teachers of his day. Indeed, it is a telling coincidence that both Salingar and Rex Gibson, the director of the 'Shakespeare and Schools Project' of the 1980s, though writing decades apart, employ the same quotation from *Hamlet* to encapsulate their approach to teaching the Bard: 'The play's the thing'.<sup>2</sup> Salingar's insistence on an intrinsic textual methodology is, for its time, a 'modern' critical standpoint. His assertion that 'the fundamental fact about Shakespeare's works is that they consist of dramatic poetry' chimes with the literary standpoint of critics such as L. C. Knights, whose commitment to treating the Shakespeare text as 'a dramatic poem', would no doubt have been familiar to the well-read teacher of the 1940s.<sup>3</sup> Keeping securely in line with Knights, Salingar rejects the early twentieth-century critical school of A. C. Bradley, averring that characters 'are not historical personages, but stage figures, creatures of the play'. After all, each era of English studies needs its *bête noire*: if Bradley fulfilled that function for Salingar's generation, F. R. Leavis would fall from grace and take on the burden some years later.

Much of Salingar's article argues strongly in favour of applying the Shakespearian criticism of the 1930s and 1940s to classroom practice. The author is clear about the literary emphasis of his teaching: plot, theme and character take a back seat to dramatic language, and 'external information' is to be kept to a minimum. He is equally certain about what he hopes his students will acquire from their study of Shakespeare, valuing their ability to understand drama through an appreciation of the rhythms, energy and power of poetic language above all else. We can presume that his schemes of work would start from 'the single scene as the natural unit of study', taken from texts judged suitable for specific years and which, when placed in sequence, would build up the students' knowledge and expertise in the

Shakespearian canon. The edition of the play chosen for study would be carefully selected and, ideally, would include a simple introduction, the briefest of notes, and photographs in place of line-drawings. Concerning the actual nuts and bolts of classroom activity, however, the article renders little illumination.

While Salinger provides several examples of the extracts he would be likely to use with his boys, and refers to the necessity of having a 'method of classroom study', we can only guess at what this method involved. The sole pedagogical technique mentioned explicitly is that of reading aloud and acting out individual scenes, but what takes place before and after these readings can only be surmised. It would be reasonable to assume that Salinger's lessons are teacher-centred and that whole-class teaching is the norm. Students are referred to throughout as an homogenous group: the 'form', the 'boys', the 'class'. And though Salinger points out in his opening paragraph that 'the impressions taken from their Shakespeare reading...are likely to be extremely miscellaneous', we are given no specific examples of individual responses. The reader forms an impression of a collection of extremely biddable boys, listening attentively to the master and enunciating Shakespeare on demand; they have the grammatical skills to enable them to analyse the 'balance of clauses' in what they read, and a glossary of literary terminology to help them define the poetic language they are encouraged to appreciate. In the course of Salinger's article, the distinction between the boy and the adult is forcefully underscored: certain aspects of Shakespeare's writing are assumed to be beyond the reach of young adolescents and any 'generalizations about character and motive' are discouraged on account of their originating 'at best...from the experience of adults.' While today's English teacher might rack her brains to find ways of making Shakespeare 'relevant' for her students, Salinger is hampered by no such anxiety. The Shakespeare canon might well provide a 'Map of Life', but Salinger's boys are expected to wait some years before they can read it with any assurance. The relationship between master and pupil, boy and man, appears to be a straightforward one in this 1940s' classroom: youth listens and learns, age talks and educates. And the authority of the text is equally assured; the beauty and wisdom of Shakespeare's work is fixed and unalterable, and the teacher must prepare the student to receive it and not, as is more the case in our post-Barthesian climate, to reproduce it with each individual reading.

What emerges clearly from a comparison between Salinger's article, and those which appear in today's educational journals, is that English teachers are now a great deal more reflective and experimental in their pedagogy than they were in the 1940s. Of course, Salinger's failure to outline his

classroom methods could be put down to contemporary perceptions of what it meant to be a competent teacher, rather than to a lack of teaching strategies. Subject knowledge was clearly paramount in the Grammar Schools of the 1940s, with teaching skills coming a poor second. Indeed, my experience of training teachers of A-Level English Literature has shown that there is still some reluctance, among a small minority of them, to probe too deeply or critically into *how* they deliver their courses. Generally speaking, though, twenty-first-century English teachers think long and hard about how they arrange their classrooms, how they pace their lessons, how they meet the needs of the individual learner, and how they assess learning outcomes. Salingar's teaching strategies may well have stretched further than reading aloud, but it's unlikely that his 'boys' would have had the variety of learning styles offered to students today. One reason that such a diverse range of classroom practices and literary approaches are now practised is that Shakespeare is offered to *all* pupils, regardless of ability, class or gender, and a one-size-fits-all approach just won't do. The pedagogical exigencies created by this democratization of Shakespeare are ably demonstrated in Robert Jeffcoate's article 'Introducing Children to Shakespeare: some conclusions', published in the Spring 1997 edition of *The Use of English*. Salingar and Jeffcoate have much in common: both ally themselves to an Arnoldian model of literature teaching, both are firm believers in students experiencing the plays first-hand and, at least in years seven to nine, in studying them in extract, and both discuss working in detail on the Pyramus and Thisbe scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, unlike Salingar, Jeffcoate eschews the practice of simply reading aloud, considering it 'a sedentary approach which requires sophisticated sight readers...quite inappropriate for mixed ability classes' and, inspired by the work of Rex Gibson, ranges much wider in his teaching practice to serve the needs of his diverse student body.<sup>4</sup>

Classroom practice aside, what can we deduce from Salingar's relatively brief article about the development of English as a school subject in the last half-century? Some of today's academics would no doubt argue that Salingar's perspective on Shakespeare in the classroom is not appreciably different from that of current English teachers. For them, the article would stand as confirmation that English as a school subject is stuck in a time warp, with examining boards and teachers alike unwilling to wake up to the radical changes brought about by the rise of literary theory, not least in the redefinition of the canonical field. One year before the introduction of Curriculum 2000, Robert Eaglestone argued in an article written for the *Guardian* that 'A levels in English are exactly the same as they were in the 1950s'<sup>5</sup>; one year later, in his full-length study *Doing English*, he paints an

even more alarmist picture, asserting that ‘the subject is not very different from how it was in the 1930s and 1940s.’<sup>6</sup> With regard to the status of Shakespeare in the English curriculum, such an assertion would seem to carry some weight. In the twenty-first century Shakespeare still holds the key position in English education in schools, being the sole compulsory named author at examined Key Stages, unchallenged now by his erstwhile rival, Chaucer and, while there may no longer be common acknowledgement of his ‘universality’, his cultural significance remains as strong as it did in the 1940s. Salingar’s placing of Shakespeare’s name in quotation marks draws the reader’s attention to the fact that it functions grammatically as a common noun, suggesting that the debate about the iconic nature of the national playwright was already underway, long before cultural materialists brought it into the critical arena. But Eaglestone is quite wrong in suggesting that, prior to Curriculum 2000, the subject was ‘pickled in educational aspic’.<sup>7</sup> Having taught in a variety of schools in both the maintained and independent sectors since the early 1980s, I would argue that English as a school subject has undergone sustained and, in some respects, radical development, since the late 1970s, and the teaching of Shakespeare has been transformed accordingly.

Shakespeare in schools is a much more complex matter now than in it was in the 1940s when, if we are to take Salingar as our guide, it was intended primarily for clever boys. Governmental policy, comprehensive education, and developments in university English studies are some of the most significant factors which have helped to shape the teaching of Shakespeare in the last two decades. None of these, though, had made much of an impact by the time I had completed my secondary education in a Grammar School in the mid-1970s. Indeed, Salingar’s Shakespeare struck me as entirely compatible with the Shakespeare of my own English teachers all those years back. Like Salingar’s boys, we girls – or (girls) as Salingar would have us – read aloud a good deal, looked closely at language and listened attentively to our teachers. Those of us who aspired to the universities of Oxford or Cambridge were handed reading lists closely resembling Salingar’s bibliography and left to fight over the local library’s one available copy of *The Wheel of Fire*. But the last two decades have moved us on from this, with English teachers being required to communicate Shakespeare to a wider audience, and for an ever-increasing number of statutorily prescribed examinations. There is no doubt that teachers nowadays feel more pressure to ‘market’ Shakespeare to their students in a climate where the written word, though still ranked highly as a cultural form, has been overtaken by the visual appeal of the screen in the majority of young people’s lives. And there is much on offer to encourage this commodification of the Bard. Funds permitting,

Shakespeare can enter our classrooms through a dizzying array of technological wizardry, making those of us still struggling to tame the interactive whiteboard, yearn nostalgically for the minimalist classroom of the 1940s where Mr Salingar and his attentive boys worked solely with a school edition of the text, albeit an inadequate one.

The influence of critical theory – *pace* Eaglestone – has also had considerable impact on how Shakespeare is taught in schools, and not only since QCA formulated some rather ill-conceived Assessment Objectives to drag the traditionalists kicking and screaming into the here and now of English studies. The critical fashion for extrinsic approaches to the text, and in particular those of the new historicists, has influenced the way we present Shakespeare to our classes at all levels, especially since the introduction of Curriculum 2000. For teachers within a comfortable distance of London, the reconstruction of the Globe theatre and the excellent work of its education team, with both primary and secondary school students, have offered an invaluable resource for exploring the historical, social and cultural specificity of a given text and Shakespeare's work as a whole. A single workshop with one of the Globe's Education team would, I have no doubt, persuade Salingar to change his view that 'enthusiasm for Shakespearean staging' results in 'a good deal of irrelevance'. Just two hours spent looking at the theatre, and working on a few textual extracts with one of its actors, can afford students at all Key Stages invaluable insights into aspects of Shakespeare's use of language, the audience for which it was written, and the crucial cultural, social and political role played by theatre in Elizabethan England.

Of course, some current English teachers continue to uphold Salingar's insistence on foregrounding Shakespeare's dramatic language and pushing its contemporary contexts into the background. Few, however, would ignore the issues of race, class and gender which are bound to arise in the modern classroom, where students expect to be allowed to express their points of view freely and to relate their own experiences of the world to the text in front of them. And it is here that drawing on well-established critical approaches, such as those of feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theory, can help to inform and structure a student's personal response to a play, especially at Key Stage 5. Furthermore, the way we teach certain plays, or certain elements of them, has been strongly influenced by the more recent developments of post-colonialist theory, gender studies and genre criticism. Such shifts in interpretation can often throw light on works which have suffered from critical neglect, thus widening the range of texts we choose for study. If, back in the 1940s, Salingar wasn't persuaded to add *Cymbeline* to his teaching repertoire by G. Wilson Knight's spirited defence of the play in *The Crown of Life*, some of the

excellent late twentieth-century readings might have been more successful in convincing him that there was more to the work than what Samuel Johnson called 'unresisting imbecility'.

It is certainly diverting to speculate about what Salingar would make of the critical theory which has emerged over the past thirty years or so. He would not be averse to some of the broader approaches of structuralism, being already used to showing his students how 'the striking pairings or contrasts' in a play create meaning; and his conviction that 'abstracting the events and reconstructing them in a sequence of their own suppresses the real chain of connexions' bears some resemblance to the *fabula / sjuzet* distinction made by some structuralist critics. His use of the Pyramus and Thisbe scene to illustrate 'elements of Shakespeare's stagecraft' suggests that he would approve of the modern critical emphasis on Shakespeare's metadramatic technique which combines the text and its theatrical contexts in a manner conducive to Salingar's way of thinking. More troubling for him, perhaps, would be the new historicists' ongoing demolition of the conservative vision of Shakespeare and his world, fostered in the 1930s and 1940s by critics like John Dover Wilson and E. M. W. Tillyard. Without the security of reading the history plays as 'hymns to Tudor order' to fall back on, Salingar would find teaching *Richard II* to thirteen-year-old boys a great deal more complex. The emergence over the past few decades of a more dominant female critical voice might also cause Salingar some pause for thought. Would he, we wonder, avoid the work of critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Coppélia Kahn in case they forced 'on boys an ethical or psychological judgement beyond their reach'; or would he consider such voices as the ideal means to bring about the 'change of emphasis for classes of girls' which he mentions in his first footnote? And how would he and his boys react to the current critical fashion for highlighting the darker elements of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? If the response to such an approach by my more mature Open University students is anything to judge by, they would find it quite a drastic and unwelcome shift in perspective.

No doubt Salingar would, like the English teacher of today, pick and choose his critical theory to suit his purposes. For example, we are all aware that the deeply entrenched notion of character in a text is questionable, but we are equally aware that reminding school students of any epoch that Hamlet is merely an assemblage of a chain of signifiers, a deferred presence, is unlikely to nurture a passion for the play. On the other hand, the overturning of traditional notions of the printed playtext in the past two decades or so has offered teachers an alternative starting point for their presentation of Shakespeare. Explaining to students that the Shakespearian text in front of them is inherently unfixed, and that we

can never hope to reconstruct a single, authentic manuscript, can be immensely liberating. No longer is it a museum piece set in stone, but evidence of a lively and enterprising theatrical world, where playwrights had to struggle to take control of their own scripts at a time when the text was a fluid and imperfect entity. Modern perceptions of the printed text are, indeed, considerably more sophisticated than they were in the 1940s, and no teacher of today would share Salinger's confident belief in the existence, somewhere, of Shakespeare's 'original' stage directions.

What emerges most strongly from a reading of Salinger's article in the first decade of the twenty-first century is that there have been more gains than losses for teachers and students of Shakespeare over the past fifty years. In some ways, it is tempting to look back to Salinger's era as to a simpler time, uncomplicated by competing theoretical theories, unfettered by state-imposed testing and ubiquitous assessment objectives. And though we might find Salinger's insistence on the primacy of the literary text somewhat limiting, we might prefer it to the view expressed in a recent NATE publication that we should read literary language as just one form of discourse alongside others, to be taught in a course which 'reunite[s] "Language" and "Literature" throughout the pre-university sectors'.<sup>8</sup> Yet we must surely rejoice that the study of Shakespeare is no longer ring-fenced for those most able to compete in a highly selective educational system, even if it means working a good deal harder to ensure that it is accessible and enjoyable for all our students. Likewise, we should feel heartened that our selection of Shakespearian texts is not circumscribed by preconceived ideas of gender, such as those which kept the romantic comedies from Salinger's class on account of their being 'too sophisticated to hold a boy's interest'.

Finally, Salinger's article opens up some intriguing questions about the impact of the Second World War on the teaching of Shakespeare and literature in general. I couldn't help but wonder what it must have been like to teach English at an Army College in the Central Mediterranean, as Salinger did, and how easy it would have been to settle back down to the relatively sedate routine of an English Grammar School. Doubtless, the prospect of teaching and learning about plays such as *Richard II* and *Henry V* must have been very different for a generation which had just come through a war, from what it is for the teachers and students of today. Furthermore, the article raises the question of how far *The Use of English* as a journal engaged with issues relating to war-time experiences. The English Association certainly considered the impact of the First World War, holding a conference whose aim, according to the *Times Literary Supplement*, was to 'discuss the effect of the war on the production and reading of books.'<sup>9</sup> In an article reporting on the conference, we find the

following conclusion:

When the war broke out Mr Gosse, and a great many other people thought it would mean an end of literature. It seemed likely that there would be much less reading of any kind and that what there was would be almost entirely of newspapers in all but name and shape. Almost the exact reverse has occurred according to the unimpeachable witnesses of the English Association.<sup>10</sup>

There is no reason to doubt that, when the Second World War threatened to push literary innovation and study from Britain's schools and universities, teachers like Salingar did their utmost to keep them alive, and it would be fascinating to research the archives of the English Association with this in mind.

### Notes

1. Bethan Marshall, *English Teachers – The Unofficial Guide: Researching the Philosophies of English Teachers*, London: Routledge Falmer, 2000, p. 5. of 'A Rough Guide to English Teachers' booklet.
2. The quotation stands as an epigraph to the Introduction of Rex Gibson's *Teaching Shakespeare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
3. L. C. Knights, 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?', *Hamlet and Other Shakespearian Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 270.
4. Robert Jeffcoate, 'Introducing Children to Shakespeare: some conclusions', *The Use of English*, Spring 1997, 48, 122-133, p. 124.
5. Robert Eaglestone, 'A critical time for English', the *Guardian*, 30 November 1999.
6. Robert Eaglestone, *Doing English*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 37.
7. Robert Eaglestone, 'A critical time for English', the *Guardian*, 30 November 1999.
8. **text: message** *The Future of A level English*, ed. John Hodgson, National Association for the Teaching of English, 2005, p. 43.
9. 'Literature and the War', *Times Literary Supplement*, June 1916, 253-254.
10. *Ibid*, p. 253.

## Shakespeare in School

L.G. Salingar

For the average schoolboy (or girl), especially at a Grammar School, the study of Shakespeare occupies a large part of his experience.<sup>1</sup> By the time he leaves school he has either read, taken part in, or watched on stage or screen anything from two or three of the plays to ten, or even more; and proportionately this counts for more of his mental life, in new interests or in boredom, than would the same amount of reading and playgoing on the part of an adult. Judging from the timetable, he is better acquainted with Shakespeare than with any other writer, or dramatist, or artist in any medium; and the associations of 'Shakespeare' are likely to colour his attitude to literature and art in general. It seems reasonable to go further: not only his attitude towards the arts, but much of his attitude towards adult experience, its range and possibilities, may well be coloured in the same way. No doubt there is rhetorical exaggeration in Johnson's claim for the dramatist that 'his Works may be considered as a Map of Life, a faithful miniature of human Transactions', so that 'he that has read *Shakespeare* with Attention will perhaps find little new in the crowded World'; but at least it would be dangerous to estimate too narrowly a boy's impressions of human nature and history as derived from Shakespeare's plays. Vague or precise, the impressions taken from their Shakespeare reading by a class as a whole are likely to be extremely miscellaneous; and some of them will be lasting.

What is needed for school work is an approach, free of unnecessary obstacles, what will give a boy both the chance of immediate enjoyment and some of his principal bearings for a more mature understanding later. In view of some of its inherent difficulties, Shakespeare work has to be graded; and it should be planned as a whole throughout the school, in method of classroom study as well as in choice of plays, so that full advantage can be gained from continuity. There is a legitimate place in 'Shakespeare' lessons for the judicious digression – often the best-remembered part of them – which arises naturally from the strangeness of the plays to the mind of a modern boy. But spontaneous digressions are one thing, and irrelevant 'Additional Notes' another. Some aspects of Shakespeare study are essential, others are merely trimmings; and it is

important that the distinction should be kept as clear as possible.

Unfortunately the school editions available are often more hindrance than help. Besides being sightly and durable, the ideal school edition should have the negative virtue of confining itself to the minimum of explanatory comment: stage directions as brief as the original (what is the point, for example, of introducing *Julius Caesar* in 'a street in Rome, a narrow winding street between houses of rough brick, three or four stories high?'); an economical glossary and a simple factual introduction, in the manner of the Penguin series; and if illustrations, which can be helpful, are to be included, then full-page photographs of contemporary material or of good modern stage settings rather than line-drawings, which are neither attractive nor informative. What is essential is that the plays should be left to be treated as plays. There is good reason to believe that the positive dislike of Shakespeare has diminished as classroom study has been freed of Notes in the manner of Verity.

This formula, however – the play's the thing – is too loose to have much practical value; something more definite is needed. There are many kinds of play-making, not all of them Shakespeare's; and the fundamental fact about Shakespeare's works is that they consist of dramatic poetry. Neither story nor character by itself has the same cardinal importance as passages of spoken poetry, or of wit or rhetoric akin to poetry, in their immediate dramatic setting. Poetic rhetoric, poetry for stage declamation, is the basis of a Shakespeare play, not an additional beauty.<sup>2</sup> It is an art where immediate effect counts for more than logical inference, and where mastery of the language counts for most of the effect.

'The Truth is', as Johnson<sup>3</sup> declared, 'that a very small part of the Reputation of this mighty Genius depends upon the naked Plot, or Story of his Plays. He lived in an Age when the Books of Chivalry were yet popular and when therefore the Minds of his Auditors were not accustomed to balance Probabilities, or to examine nicely the Proportion between Causes and Effects.' One need not share Johnson's patronising attitude towards the Elizabethans to agree with the substance of this comment, particularly in its application to work in schools. Obviously, a reader must grasp the main sequence of events; and many boys will do well, when it comes to written answers, if they can set down accurately what is done, by whom, and in what order. But that is no justification for the emphasis sometimes laid on 'the naked Plot'. At best it can only merge Shakespeare's story in Holinshed's or Plutarch's; more often, it will only draw attention to its nakedness. Boys are suspicious of any attempt by adults to treat make-believe with the seriousness of reality; and they are unlikely to be much impressed by a detailed study of the plot of *The*

*Merchant of Venice* or by what Johnson elsewhere calls the ‘unresisting imbecility’ of the fable in *Cymbeline*. The business of abstracting the events and reconstructing them in a sequence of their own suppresses the real chain of connexions, which is theatrical and imaginative, and substitutes another, that of some improbable detective story.

On the other hand, the time factor and the other conditions of classroom study and acting suggest the single scene as the natural unit of study, particularly with junior forms;<sup>4</sup> and concentration on scenes and their sequence, rather than events, is in keeping with Shakespeare’s methods of construction. Perhaps the best introduction to Shakespeare, for boys about twelve, is by way of the Bottom scenes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – with the other scenes cut and the connecting links briefly summarized. Here the farce and artificiality are frank and unmistakable, and the production of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ affords a convenient opportunity to bring out the elements of Shakespeare’s stagecraft. Discussion of Wall and the courtiers’ comments, for example, can lead on to the consideration of what can be shown on the stage and what Shakespeare tries to show; Thisbe’s last speech and the Prologue (with Lysander’s obliging ‘moral’ – ‘it is not enough to speak, but to speak true’) lend themselves to a contrast, in poetic effectiveness, with Puck’s ‘Now the hungry lion roars’; and the end of the play illustrates how Shakespeare carries a scene through a succession of moods, partly by means of stage business, dancing and music, but chiefly by means of the poetry. In their second or third year of Shakespeare study it is useful for a form to dwell on the sequence and tempo of events in a single scene and the way the points of main significance are made by Shakespeare’s choice of language; for example, such a scene as that in *Richard II* (II. i), where the news of Bolingbroke’s return to England is given some hundred and twenty lines after the news of his father’s death, and less than fifty lines after the King leaves for Ireland. The sudden changes of fortune are stressed by the wording; in Richard’s speech, for instance –

Come on, our queen; to-morrow must we part;  
Be merry, for our time of stay is short:-

or in the preface to the news of Bolingbroke’s return-

even through the hollow eyes of death  
I see life peering.

After it has considered the sequence of stage events and the use of poetry for stage effect in scenes like this, a form is better placed to take in a more complex movement, like that of the middle scenes of *Julius Caesar*, or to see how main plot and sub-plot hold together in such a play as *Henry IV*.

References to Shakespeare's theatre and background may be very helpful in discussing questions of this sort; but the broad effects of his dramatic construction can be deduced from the text, without much need to rely on external information.<sup>5</sup>

As with the plot, taken by itself, so with the characters: they are not historical personages, but stage figures, creatures of the play, often no more lifelike in scale and portrayal than good caricatures or monumental effigies; or, from another point of view, they may be compared with the instruments in an orchestra, each with its separate contribution to make to the total effect. Their stage presence is more important than any motives or biography that can be imputed to them by inference; and, for class study especially, it is their stage presence, the surface impression of the text, that matters most; broad outlines are sufficient, and the more striking pairings or contrasts of role. Here, too, the farcical scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provide a good starting-point, with their contrasts between Bottom and Titania, Bottom and Puck, and so on; or, again, Shakespeare's methods are readily to be seen in such contrasting figures as Williams, Pistol, and the King in *Henry V*. On the other hand, the attempt to work out character-studies in detail, with consistent and neatly tabulated characteristics, is liable either to distort the acted play, or to force on boys an ethical or psychological judgment beyond their reach; or both. It can lead only too promptly to the absurd, as in one set of school Notes on Brutus and Cassius – 'Stoic, abhorring suicide' and 'Epicurean, welcoming it'; or to the meaningless tags and false sentiment of an adult writing down to the level of a quite imaginary school-boy. In another set of school Notes, for example, Brutus is said to be 'a man doomed to failure from the start, by reason of his idealizing nature'; and, as for Antony, 'you should find in the play the indication of those traits which so quickly led him to degeneration and ruin'. The most dreary feature of this last note, leading outside the play altogether, is that it is not even necessary for examination purposes; but it would not be hard to multiply examples.

The essential indications of role and motive are contained in the direct poetic impression made by the speeches. When Antony, for example, speaks his prophecy over the body of Caesar-

And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,  
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,  
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice  
Cry *Havoc*, and let slip the dogs of war,-

it is not his attachment to a dead friend that we notice first, but the horror and power of the imagery. And this is what matters. It repeats a principal

theme of the play; and, for Antony's part in it, prepares both for the next episode, with the Servant,<sup>6</sup> and for the crucial scene of mob-oratory that follows.

It is necessary from the start, then, that boys should have plenty of practice in reading aloud, and reading aloud with an ear for the rhythmic beat and pause of a blank verse line and for the run and balance of a sentence. Distinctness and stress matter more than 'expression' or gesture or stage position; and, especially at first, declamation is more of a merit than a fault. Many boys, confronted by a succession of unfamiliar words, are carried forward, as many of the first audiences themselves may have been, by the general run and sonority of the lines; and they can be helped in this by some attention to the formal structure of their lines, to the relations of pause and stress, and to those devices of repetition, antithesis, balance of clauses, and so on, that Shakespeare uses constantly to reinforce the sense-structure of his periods. In Antony's lines, for instance, boys can appreciate the value of the alliteration and the prolongation of the third line quoted to the climax in the fourth. With prose as well as verse, some sense of formal rhythm is needed.

The study of imagery is naturally linked with these rhetorical and rhythmical devices. The imagery, with its extraordinary vigour and concreteness, is the chief source of vitality in a Shakespeare play; it is his command of the language of things, acts, sensations, that makes his lines not only great poetry, but great poetry for the theatre. And to approach a difficult or an important passage by way of the physical qualities of its main images is probably the best way to gain something from it, whether for general literary appreciation, or for the study of the play as such. Acquaintance with the technical names of the principal figures of speech, which is indispensable, should first come, of course, from the discussion of the content of selected passages; later, attention to the formal structure can often help to bring the content into stronger relief. The learning of a passage by heart can be a valuable exercise if it is accompanied by some study of the main images in it and their contribution to the dramatic effect; otherwise, there is not much point in learning 'Friends, Romans, countrymen' or 'The quality of mercy' as recitation pieces.

It may be objected that the approach to Shakespeare's verse suggested here means a return to the out-of-date study of rhetoric, or at least to an undue emphasis on rhetoric, to the detriment of studying a play's content and action. There are two answers to this objection: first, that some attention to the formalities of verse is appropriate in view of the manner in which Shakespeare and his audience were themselves trained to write or listen;<sup>7</sup> and, second, that looking at the poetic effect of the verse is really a

more direct way of finding what a Shakespearean character is doing than attempting to deal with his speeches by way of paraphrase or summary. No doubt a master must continue to give paraphrases and summaries again and again where he does not wish the class to be held up by minor difficulties of language; but at the critical points where closer examination seems called for, it is usually the poetry that matters first to the understanding of the drama. In Macbeth's soliloquies, for example, the prose meaning is extremely involved; but something of his state of mind can be gathered directly from the sound and the build of the sentence in lines like these:

It were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly: if th' assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease, success; that but this blow  
Might be the be-all land the end-all here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come.

And the conflict of his feelings is sufficiently conveyed by the conflicting physical associations of the images, such as 'trammel up' and jump, or the image of Pity-

like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast.

With lines such as these it becomes quite artificial to say that the dramatic character is 'expressed' in the imagery; if it is not created by the imagery it is nowhere at all. The materials which make up our spontaneous impression of the character are the feelings aroused directly by the spoken word; and any insight the schoolboy can gain into human nature as a result of his Shakespeare reading is to be gained by considering Shakespeare's poetic language, and not from generalizations about character and motive, which are likely, at best, to come from the experience of adults.

The guiding aim of a Shakespeare syllabus should be, then to prepare a boy for receptive attention – not a passive but an active process of the mind - to the power of Shakespeare's language; to Shakespeare's language as a language of the theatre, used in situations belonging first to the theatre, and only by implication, though by constant implication, to the sphere of actual life. The first steps of introduction to his plays, for boys of twelve or so should seek to make familiar some of the main conventions of drama, and to show them that reading verse aloud can be

enjoyable and that each passage of verse may have its own colour and feeling; and this can best be done by concentrating on the pattern of speech and action, the contrasts of mood and character, within selected scenes. Plays of well-marked external action provide the best material for the first two or three years of Shakespeare work: the Histories, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, and the farcical parts of the comedies – among which *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Comedy of Errors* ought not to be forgotten; on the other hand, the romantic comedies with their transitions to and fro between humour and lyrical fantasy, are far too sophisticated to hold a boy's interest.

In the second or third year of Shakespeare work it is desirable to begin discussing a play as a whole, referring from one scene to another to build up the outlines of theme, plot and character, and considering what the main scenes and persons of the play contribute to the general impression. But this is chiefly a matter for stocktaking and revision; the main emphasis should still fall on selected scenes, on the stage situation within these scenes, and on the nature and effect of particular speeches.

Some sense of the elements of Shakespeare's drama as poetic drama is an attainable goal for the study of his plays in school and one well worth attaining; all that is wished for boys later, in recognition of the psychological depth of the plays, can thus have the ground prepared for it. Perhaps they may find in them something that could be compared to 'a Map of Life'; but before they can make any use of it they will need to become accustomed to the conventional signs.

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\* Out of print.

† Reprinting

### Notes

1. This article has been written with the work of a boys' Grammar School mainly in view. The methods of study suggested would no doubt need considerable modification for Modern Schools and probably some change of emphasis for classes of girls. But I believe that the same general principles should apply in each case.
2. This holds good even of the most convincingly lifelike of the tragedies; cf. F.R. Leavis's article on *Othello* (*Scrutiny*, Dec. 1917).
3. In an early essay (D. Nichol Smith, *Shakespeare Criticism*, World's Classics, pp. 87-88).
4. Cf. F. Whitehead's article *Drama in the Classroom* in *The Use of English*, Vol. I, No. 1.
5. An enthusiasm for Shakespearean staging as such, away from the poetic text, can produce a good deal of irrelevance; e.g. one school edition comments on the scene mentioned in *Richard II* that 'an interval of five months is suppressed' after Richard leaves the stage, with the explanation that 'a separate short scene for the conspirators would have broken the alternate order of full-stage and front-stage'. Perhaps; but a more interesting explanation arises directly from Shakespeare's text.
6. Cf. H. Granville-Barker, *Preface to Shakespeare*, I, 74.  
Cf. M.C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, chaps. iv-v.

Reproduced from *The Use of English*, Volume 1.2, Winter 1949, pp. 64-71

## Beyond *The Railway Children*: The Significance of Edith Nesbit

Roger Calvert

The conventional estimate of Edith Nesbit focuses almost exclusively on *The Railway Children* as Peter Hunt does in *Children's Literature*, dismissing her later fiction as dream fantasies and lacking in the substantive issues to be found in modern fiction for teenagers. However, it is possible to claim that Edith Nesbit has had a profound influence on writers of fiction for children. When A.N. Wilson claimed classic status for C.S. Lewis in his biography of him, he included Edith Nesbit as an equal and wrote that she influenced Lewis greatly in the way that he wrote the Narnia books:

They are E. Nesbit children; they 'jaw' rather than talk; they say 'by gum' and 'Crikey!' They seem no more to belong to the mid or late twentieth century than Lewis did himself. (Wilson, 1990: 221)

It is possible to conclude that he borrowed a great deal more than plot, extending to the technical solutions of how to make children interact in a lively and convincing manner, how to speak to children as a narrator and how to make the use of magic convincing. As such it is possible to see signs of her influence in children's authors as diverse as Enid Blyton, Ransome and J.K. Rowling.

In *The House that Books Built*, Francis Spufford states:

E.Nesbit's non-magical stories – the Bastable series, the Railway Children – take care to remove one parent into prison or death or a faraway country. (Spufford, 2002: 115-6)

She does this, he says, in order to free the children from adult interference. This is incorrect since *The Story of the Amulet* and *The House of Arden* both conclude with the restoration of parents; the children's use of magic is intended to bring about that return. In fact, all her books are

concerned with the reuniting of the family - in *The Enchanted Castle* the children create a new family around the two lovers whom they have brought together - whether through the use of make-believe, as in the earlier novels, or through its stronger relation, magic, in the later. Nesbit is strongly influenced by Romantic notions of the imagination and its powers, which the Romantics located primarily in children. In her books only children can manage to use imagination and adults are very much assessed as help or hindrance according to whether they believe or disbelieve. Later examples of this litmus test might be the Dursleys in the Harry Potter series or Susan in the Narnia sequence, who does not enter heaven with the other children because she has become an unimaginative adult:

‘Yes’, said Eustace, ‘and whenever you’ve tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, “What wonderful memories you have! Fancy you still thinking about those funny games we used to play when we were children”.’ (Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 2001:168.)

In an article on Edith Nesbit in *The Guardian*, Natasha Walter concluded:

Nesbit’s narratives as a whole tend to be a catalogue of disappointments and confusions. Magic promises everything but turns out to be a source of chaos.  
(*The Guardian* 9/10/04)

In fact, a great many of the confusions stem from Edith Nesbit’s delight in playing with the inexactitude of language, following in the footsteps of Lewis Carroll so that equivocation undoes the children until they learn how to phrase commands so as to get a desired result. Magic itself is chaotic until the children learn how to operate it, which very often involves them learning about themselves and what they truly want and what is truly valuable. Magic does not cause chaos; rather, it reveals the chaos within the children between what they truly desire and what is imported which is expressed in vagueness of language. This very often requires them to unlearn what society has taught them is valuable and, in knowing themselves, they can accomplish their quest which is the restoration of the family. Walters notes the pervasive irony in Nesbit’s work and concludes that it arises out of the disparity between the promise of magic and the disappointing reality. In fact, the irony springs from her awareness of the children’s view of the world and the adult view, which very often runs parallel but only occasionally makes contact, as, for example, in *The Treasure Seekers* when the children go to see a newspaper

editor in the hopes of selling him some poetry. They ask him what he puts in his newspaper:

‘Oh news’, said he, ‘and dull articles, and things about Celebrities. If you know any Celebrities, now?’ (Nesbit, 1994:65)

*Plus ça change!* Oswald has to confess he knows no one wicked and the only famous person he knows is a politician:

‘But I know someone with a title – Lord Tottenham.’  
 ‘The mad old Protectionist, eh? How did you come to know him?’  
 ‘We don’t know him to speak to. But he goes over the Heath every day at three, and he strides along like a giant – with a black cloak like Lord Tennyson’s flying behind him, and he talks to himself like one o’ clock.’  
 ‘What does he say?’ The Editor had sat down again, and he was fiddling with a blue pencil. (Nesbit, 1994:66)

Unknowingly, the children are being primed for a story on what politicians get up to whilst walking across the common. Oswald is clearly taken with the wild magic of the figure whereas the editor is more intrigued by a story about a famous statesman living in La La Land. Nesbit was the first children’s writer to incorporate her views of contemporary life and politics into a story and established a tradition, which includes C.S. Lewis on progressive schools and J.K. Rowling on journalists in *Reeter Skeeter*. But no one is so fundamental, so comprehensive and uses humour verging on satire as Nesbit does. As can be seen from the above quotation, with its reference to Tennyson, Nesbit’s books use literature a lot, both as a model for the children in shaping their world and for Nesbit in organising her depiction of it. The enemies of the imagination are Victorian models of respectability and class hierarchy, embodied in figures who owe everything to Dickens. In *The Would-Be-Goods*, the Bastables are required to make friends with Denis and Daisy, whom Oswald characterises as ‘little pink frightened things, like white mice, with very bright eyes’. The two children arrive accompanied by their aunt who wears ‘black with beady things and a tight bonnet’. She is instantly recognisable as ‘the enemy’:

No one but that kind of black beady tight lady would say ‘little boys’. She is like Miss Murdstone in *David Copperfield*. I should like to tell her so; but she would not understand. I don’t suppose she has ever read anything but *Markham’s*

*History and Mangnall's Questions* – improving books like that.  
(Nesbit, 1995:6)

She is clearly an ancestor of later repressive figures such as the Great Aunt who manages to confine even Nancy in the Ransome series. To rescue Denis and Daisy from such a frightening régime will take an extraordinary effort of the imagination and the Bastables mount a special play for their benefit, taking *The Jungle Book* as their model. The description of the building of this *tableau vivant* is like the composition of a still-life in that the creators step back every so often, note a corner in the picture still to be filled in and borrow or cannibalise some other possession of the owner of the house, where they are staying, to fill that space. So bursts of frenetic activity are followed by moments of intense thought, yet all the while the project is growing: someone always comes up with a solution just when inspiration seems at a stand. The effect is of wonderful spontaneity and the sense of a group imbued with shared purpose. The picture is only a collection of pots and pans and tiger-skin rugs and yet transcends its origins in a marvellously surreal and comic manner: it is largely composed of animals who keep wandering off on their own business, like the flamingos and hedgehogs in *Alice in Wonderland*, so the picture has to be creatively maintained as well as conceived.

It is interesting to note that part of the dressing-up for acting requires removing clothes and changing colour. Lewis does the same when Aslan liberates people in his wild ride in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The symbolic removal of constraint required by the imagination is evident. Into the midst of all this vital energy Daisy wanders. She has been beginning her education by reading the source book: *The Jungle Book* (what you read is the divisor between being a white mouse and freedom) and she 'freaks out' because the imagination has the power to terrify, particularly those who are not used to it. This is something Nesbit never conceals. Oswald tries to offer her a secure role in treating her as the damsel threatened by a dragon who is rescued by the hero and married but she faints at the sight of the two younger boys pretending to be tigers. At first Oswald thinks 'with surprise that perhaps after all she did know how to play' but then she turns green 'like a cheap oyster on a stall'. The girls attempt to loosen her dress though Oswald notes with some disdain that 'it was only the kind that comes down straight without a waist', that is, rather babyish for her age, as if she is being restrained from growing up. A more successful rescue occurs in *The Treasure Seekers* where the girl, a real princess, 'began to laugh at last and not look quite so like a doll'. At the moment of the game's disintegration in *The Would-Be-Goods*, the owner returns and beats the boys for the misuse of his property. One wonders,

perhaps, if there is not a deeper reason, in that this innocent ritual has the power to shock and challenge, rather like the pillow fight and ceremony of misrule in Jean Vigo's film *Zéro de Conduite*. The two have in common the ability to take very ordinary props to hand and use them to create something transcendent. Francis Spufford called the adventures of the Bastables 'purely realistic comedy', which is true if one thinks of Dickens as a purveyor of purely realistic comedy. What makes the difference is the priority given to the imagination as an article of faith:

Now if you sit perfectly silent for a long time and look at the sea, or the sky, or the running water of a river, something happens to you – a sort of magic. Not the violent magic that makes the kind of adventures that I have been telling you about, but a kind of gentle but very strong inside magic, that makes things clear, and shows you what things are important, and what are not. You try it next time you are in a very bad temper, or when you think someone has been very unjust to you, or when you are very disappointed and hurt about anything. (Nesbit, 1987:219)

This could be offered as a pretty fair paraphrase of Keats' *On the Sea*, that manifesto of the Romantic imagination: how to use it and what its use is:

Oh ye! Who have your eye-balls vex'd and tir'd,  
Feast them on the wideness of the sea;

The current situation when Edith Nesbit came to write about the Bastables was that there were several available models of first person narratives, including *Huckleberry Finn* and *Treasure Island*, which gave Twain and Stevenson access to immediacy of action and sensation, and in Huck's case to his struggles with his conscience – but Nesbit wanted a child narrator who was recognisably contemporary and English. She had to create her own and the style of narration she created became a model for other authors who followed her, principally C.S. Lewis. The patterns she established with Oswald, who narrates in *The Would-be-Goods* and *The Treasure Seekers*, were so comfortable to her that when in her later novels she entered them as the narrator herself the same patterns are present in modified form. The hallmark of Nesbit's style of narration is that it is spontaneous, seemingly artless and presumes a dialogue with the reader who is assumed to be listening whilst the author reads and therefore has the freedom to comment, to question and to offer opinions and advice as the story unfolds. The basis of this apparently improvised approach to storytelling is a precondition, which both she and Oswald offer at the start

of their narration, that they will be completely open and disclose everything. Any exceptions are explained and justified as being in the interests of the listening child. F.R. Leavis described Flora Finching's speech in *Dickens the Novelist* as 'exuberant and full of copious unpredictabilities' (Leavis, 1972:317), which exactly fits Nesbit's narrative style. She gave her own sense of challenge in how to write a narrative, and the delight she found in writing a narrative to Oswald, so he mirrors his creator by sharing the difficulties and delights of writing with the reader. Edith wrote *The Treasure Seekers* out of a need to make money, just as the Bastables desperately explore any means of making money to restore the fortunes of The House of Bastable. They try out several of the methods Edith used, including writing poetry for publication, hence the visit to the editor mentioned earlier. The unpredictability comes in the variety of technical devices she employs to communicate the sense of story being constructed, as we read, by a writer who is learning his craft as he writes. This dramatises Edith's own case:

I am afraid the last chapter was rather dull. It is always dull in books when people talk and talk, and don't do anything, but I was obliged to put it in, or else you wouldn't understand all the rest. (Nesbit, 1994:21)

So insistence on strict editing is followed by unashamed digression and painstaking over explanation so that the reader will be clear. Period catchphrases and slang alternate with smug use of advanced diction or naïve confessions of ignorance of words' meaning. Adults are dismissed as useless or advanced as clinching authorities. The tone she adopts for Oswald also varies: one moment he can be confiding, confident the reader is fully with him, the next aggressive and suspicious of the reader's response:

Our Mother is dead, and if you think we don't care because I don't tell you much about her you only show that you don't understand people at all. (Nesbit, 1994:10)

So the authority of the narrator and his relation to his readers varies throughout the story and Edith, when it came to inserting herself as narrator in her later novels, adopted the same device. She also kept the same pleasure in playing with the techniques of narration: that is, at one point she will gaily admit ignorance and the next confide in her readers:

Father and Mother had not the least idea of what had happened in their absence. This is often the case, even when

there are no magic carpets or Phoenixes in the house.  
(Nesbit, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, 1978:33)

She also defends her characters just as Oswald did:

I hope you notice that they were not cowardly enough to cry till their father had gone; they knew he had quite enough to upset him without that. But when he was gone everyone felt as if it had been trying not to cry all its life, and that it must cry now, if it died for it. So they cried. (Nesbit, *The Story of the Amulet*, 1996:3)

Julia Briggs, in her biography of Nesbit, asserts that the possession of imagination leads the children in her novels into unmanageable confrontations with adults. But in her later novels, Edith suggests that children have advantages over adults:

Poor people are very friendly and kind to you when you are a child. They will let you come into their houses and talk to you and show you things in a way that they would never condescend to do with your grown-up relations. (Nesbit, 1987:137)

The principal advantage is the unalloyed possession of imagination, in the Keatsian sense of being able to be in doubts and open without rushing to judgement, which is the quality Edith claims for herself as a storyteller:

And as I am always telling you the most wonderful things happen to all sorts of people, only you never hear about them because the people think that no-one will believe their stories, and so they don't tell them to anyone except me. And they tell me, because they know that I can believe anything. (Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle*, 1979:30)

This degree of openness is one of the differentiating qualities between Edith Nesbit and her admirer C.S. Lewis, whose narrative voice is necessarily simplified and focused by his didactic purpose:

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* grew out of Lewis's experience of being stung back into childhood by his defeat at the hands of Elizabeth Anscombe at the Socratic Club. (Wilson, 1990:220)

Since his religious beliefs could no longer be defended through argument they should be given the compelling reality of myth, with the consequences for his narrative voice that it becomes liable to be instructive, rather like treating his readers as a troop of boy scouts, with Lewis assuming the role as narrator of one possessed of uncanny knowledge and perfect understanding – which also means he lacks Edith's exquisite tact when it comes to dealing with childhood feelings:

Crying is all right in its way while it lasts. But you have to stop sooner or later, and then you still have to decide what to do. (Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, 1990:21)

Edith Nesbit's concept of the imagination differs from other contemporary writers for children. In one of Frances Hodgson Burnett's novels, *The Little Princess*, the imagination is of primary importance but as a way of setting standards for the heroine to follow through modelling conduct for herself in stories, and as a way of insisting that she is someone different to the image of herself which is being forced upon her by adults intent on breaking her. When Sara Crewe becomes in reality the Little Princess through the wealth of the Indian Gentleman we can see that money buys what the imagination dreams of. Nesbit's view of the imagination is a view of the world as a place of infinite possibilities unless one blocks them out by a rigid belief in the adult value of fact. It is external rather than internalised and psychological.

If Nesbit established the importance of a style of narration in which the author talks directly to the child, she also established the importance of the group of children, of roughly similar ages and of mixed sex. Instead of a single hero or heroine, or two male friends who share the adventure, she creates the classic grouping of two boys and two girls which lays down the template for Ransome, Lewis, Blyton and a great many more. Kipling writes about a boy and a girl in the *Puck* stories but the children have no adventures themselves, rather the adventures are brought to them by Puck in the form of stories which are told to them with the purpose of getting the children to begin to recognise strands of national character running throughout the consecutive periods of history in which the stories occur. In Nesbit, the children go into the past and are leading players rather than passive recipients. She also established the roles within the group which later writers have copied. Out of the four a boy is always the eldest, a girl second, followed by another boy and a girl always the youngest; Ransome alters the pattern slightly but Lewis, and Blyton in *The Famous Five* do not. The elder children always take on the roles of substitute parents:

We got a sheet of paper out of an old exercise-book, and we made H.O. prick his own thumb, because he is our little brother and it is our duty to teach him to be brave. (Nesbit, 1994:90)

The boy is the leader, and the elder girl the mother, often left in charge by the real mother:

And then she remembered what Mother had said the night before she went away, about Anthea being the eldest girl, and about trying to make the others happy, and things like that. (Nesbit, 1996:4)

At this point, Anthea thinks up a plan, which begins the series of adventures so we can see that Nesbit was able to free up the role of who should lead. The elder girl as parental substitute acts also as moral conscience to the group, forecasting the likely adult response to their schemes:

Dora screwed up her nose the way she always does when she is going to talk like the good elder sister in books, and said, 'That would be very wrong: it's like pickpocketing or taking pennies out of father's great-coat when it's hanging in the hall'. (Nesbit, 1994:17)

Nevertheless, just like Anthea, she comes up with a good idea to forward the group's plans a moment later, so she is not a kill-joy and her point of view is accepted by the group as necessary – unlike Susan in the Narnia books, who is a total wet blanket and reluctant believer. It is no surprise by the end of the series to find she is devoted to nylons, lipstick and being an adult. Lewis contrasts her with the younger girl, Lucy, who is much more to his taste:

'And where is the Queen Susan?'  
'At Cair Paravel,' said Corin. 'She's not like Lucy, you know, who's as good as a man, or at any rate as good as a boy.'  
(Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, 1998:194)

It has to be admitted that it looks as if Lewis's prejudices are showing here. His treatment of the younger boy, Edmund, also differs from Nesbit's treatment of younger sons. The crime Edmund commits in betraying his family to the White Witch stems from brotherly rivalry and resentment at being bossed around by his elder brother:

He had just settled in his mind what sort of palace he would have.....and was putting the finishing touches to some schemes for keeping Peter in his place, when the weather changed. (Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1962:84)

After Edmund is redeemed by Aslan's sacrifice, his interest as a character disappears and he declines into ponderous solemnity and becoming a 'yes-man' for his brother. Edith Nesbit recognises the naturalness of jealousy but converts the situation into comedy since her younger brothers like pointing out with a certain lugubrious humour the flaws in their leader's plan just at the moment when the plan is about to come unravelled with disastrous effect. Younger brothers also have skills and interests in their own right not shared by the older boy:

Robert stuck steadily to his point. One great point about Robert is the steadiness with which he can stick.

'I think we ought to test them,' he said.

'You young duffer,' said Cyril, 'fireworks are like postage stamps. You can only use them once.'

'What do you suppose it means by "Carter's tested seeds?"'

There was a blank silence. Then Cyril touched his forehead with his finger and shook his head.

'A little wrong here,' he said. 'I was afraid of that with poor Robert. All that cleverness, you know, and being top in algebra – it's bound to tell –' (Nesbit, 1978:12)

The children in Nesbit seem to have an intuitive knowledge of one another and a concern for one another's feelings as part of maintaining group cohesion, just as much as the group is concerned not to let any one member show off or dominate too much. However, Edith is also able to express those sudden storms of bitter internecine warfare that sweep over children for no substantial reason:

'Tell-tale tit, its tongue shall be split,  
And all the dogs in London shall have a little bit,'  
Sang Robert.

'It's always the way if you have girls in anything.' Cyril spoke in a cold displeasure that was worse than Robert's cruel quotation, and even Anthea said, 'Well, *I'm* not afraid if I *am* a girl,' which, of course, was the most cutting thing of all. (Nesbit, 1996:88-89)

The worst insult of all, worse than being a baby or a sneak, never loved by children, is the accusation of being a girl in the sense of being a Victorian doll, afraid to take risks, rather like Daisy in *The Treasure Seekers*. In comparison, Lewis's handling of the others disbelieving Lucy when she claims to have seen Aslan in *Prince Caspian* seems much less evenhanded in its expression of her martyrdom, since he does have an ideological point to make:

You must just take it, Trumpkin, that we really do know about Aslan; a little bit about him I mean. And you mustn't talk about him like that again. It isn't luck for one thing; and it's all nonsense for another. The only question is whether Aslan was really there. (Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, 2001:140)

This is undoubtedly the voice of cold superiority but unacknowledged as such. Instead it is presented as the voice of righteousness, the voice of the leader. It is a little disconcerting to encounter small boys who consistently talk like adults or King Arthur but it is one of the problems of allegory, as J.R.R. Tolkien noted. Lewis did try to avoid the inherent difficulty in allowing his children to grow up very rapidly in Narnia by limiting their tours of duty to two. Susan is, of course, innately timid and behaves in a downright 'bitchy' manner towards Lucy, whom she blames for all her fears and anxieties. Nesbit, although earlier, is sufficiently modern to explore gender issues, albeit in a very gentle way, in *The House of Arden*, through a heroine who wants adventure more than the boy. It is also interesting in that book to see how many of the historical episodes are concerned with man's inhumanity to women, including the treatment of witches and Anne Boleyn, as an example of a cruelly treated wife. The question of difference in treatment between her and Lewis shows itself in the comedy Nesbit extracts from subverting the roles she has created and playing with them, even to the extent of the characters deconstructing themselves:

'To brush his hair and his clothes and to wash his face and hands was to our hero but the work of a moment,' said Gerald, and went to suit the action to the word.

It was a very sleek boy, brown and thin and interesting-looking, that knocked at the door of the parlour where mademoiselle sat reading a yellow-covered book and wishing vain wishes. (Nesbit, 1979:9)

Gerald is playing with the language of children's books, notably their high moral tone and message, and Nesbit carries on the humour, laughing at

the cliché used to describe Victorian heroines: ('pale and interesting') since Gerald is planning to 'seduce' the governess i.e. get her to give permission for an expedition unaccompanied by adults. To complete the subversion, the French governess is reading a book with a yellow cover, which is the mark of racy literature, from France of course. The Victorian and Edwardian periods were, as Mark Girouard has pointed out in his book *The Return to Camelot*, obsessed with chivalry and its influence on the code of conduct of the gentleman. In Edith Nesbit the code does influence the behaviour of the children just as it affects the language they use, borrowed indiscriminately and combined with school slang and whatever they can pick up, jackdaw-like, to form the private language of the tribe. But the lessons they learn are more complex and less orthodox than the code allows. Lewis is much more straightforward in his children's strict adherence to chivalric patterns:

Peter stepped back, waiting for him to rise.

'Oh, bother, bother, bother,' said Edmund to himself. 'Need he be as gentlemanly as all that? I suppose he must. Comes of being a Knight *and* a High King. I suppose it's what Aslan would like.' (Lewis, 2001:210)

His children grow up in Narnia to speak perfect pseudo-Malory, full of 'Madams' and 'Fair friends' and 'By the Lion's mane!' This completely unthinking acceptance of chivalry carries him over an issue which, in fact, greatly preoccupied the Edwardian gentleman and lady, or at least some of them: how to respond to the working class:

The concept of chivalry undoubtedly helped to release or inspire a great deal of genuine idealism among ardent young men of the upper and middle classes at the time; but it had the danger that, by elevating them on, as it were spiritual chargers, it could create awkward barriers between helpers and helped. (Girouard, 1981:251)

As a socialist, Edith Nesbit was aware of these dangers as well as the difficulties of the working class and the need, she felt, to assist. It was part of her understanding of the complexity of chivalry. Lewis was not aware. He has his own blue collar workers in the dwarves whom the children treat with kindly condescension when they are Uncle Tom figures, like calling Trumpkin the dwarf 'their dear Little friend' or 'DLF' for short, or regarding them as pitiably blind when they refuse Aslan's offers of redemption in *The Last Battle*. As a token of his good intentions Aslan has put food before them which they can see only as dirty water and roots and

hay but nevertheless fight over:

But when at last they sat down to nurse their black eyes and bleeding noses, they all said: 'Well, at any rate there's no Humbug here. We haven't let anyone take us in. The dwarfs are for the dwarfs.' (Lewis, 2001:183)

They are clearly not in the mood to accept charity or direction from those who are their superiors and so must remain outside Aslan's heaven. This concern with the lower orders on the part of those who conceive of themselves as privileged can be seen in Harry Potter when Hermione forms a society for the protection of house elves from exploitation. This is clearly satirised as political correctness gone mad. Ron provides the common sense exposure and Harry offers an example of a genuine and sincere relationship which does end in success when he frees Dobbie and gets him out of the clutches of the very upper-class and very snobbish Malfoy.

In early Edith Nesbit, some adults are present as advisors and the children allow them this role because the adults have proved that they can play and use their imaginations: Uncle Albert in the Bastable stories is an example. Captain Flint is another who needs to play and is accepted as necessary, particularly since he can shape the adult world to fit in with the children's imaginative needs. In her later work, however, Edith brought in adults on an equal basis with children or even as inferiors in the world of magic, just as the very charming but utterly useless learned gentleman in *The Amulet* has to have childish protection if he is to survive. In *The Enchanted Castle*, the formal roles and status are so confused that the rules governing behaviour between young and old can be played as a game, both sides knowing that what is being offered on the surface is only a code for something much deeper which is a much more realistic estimation of how children attempt to manipulate adults and *vice versa*.

'Little deceiver!' she said. 'Why not say at once you want to be free of surveillance, how you say – overwatching – without pretending it is me you wish to please?'

'You have to be careful with grown-ups,' said Gerald, 'but it isn't all pretence either. We don't want to trouble you – and we don't want you to –' (Nesbit, 1979:10)

What does frighten children in Nesbit's books in their attitude to adulthood is the loss of the faculty of imagination. This can be seen in Gerald's horrified view of his brother Jimmy when the magic ring turns

Jimmy into his adult form:

Gerald wildly wondered what magic and how much had been needed to give history and a past to these two things of yesterday, the rich Jimmy and the Ugly-Wugly. If he could get them away would all memory fade – in this boy's mind, for instance, in the minds of all the people who did business with them in the City? Would the mahogany-and-clerk-furnished offices fade away? Were the clerks real? Was the mahogany? Was he himself real? Was the boy?  
(Nesbit, 1979:171)

That is, it is imagination which gives reality to a personality in Nesbit's view and without that, the individual is hollow because they have exchanged a living world for one of 'stocks and shares, bulls and bears', of adult fact and ultimate unreality.

Nesbit hates exceedingly this world of modern capitalism and the British Empire and her novels are full of disparaging references to it. Indeed she demolishes its favourite excuse, that the modern working man and woman are living in the best of all possible worlds compared to the cruelty and oppression of previous ages:

'I hate your times. They're ugly, they're cruel,' said Richard.

'They don't cut your head off for nothing anyhow in our times,' said Edred, 'and shut you up in the Tower.'

'They do worse things,' said Richard. 'I know. They make people work fourteen hours a day for nine shillings a week, so that they never have enough to eat or wear, and no time to sleep or be happy in. They won't give people food or clothes, or let them work to get them; and then they put the people in prison if they take enough to keep them alive. They let people get horrid diseases, till their jaws drop off, so as to have a particular kind of china. Women have to go out to work instead of looking after their babies, and the little girl that's left in charge drops the baby and it's left crippled for life.' (Nesbit, 1987:233-4)

What is so impressive about Edith Nesbit is the variety and sophistication of the tactics she uses to convey her messages rather than continued denunciation, which would render the writing of a children's novel redundant. In *The Story of the Amulet*, the children have stowed away on a Phoenician ship which is on a trading voyage to Cornwall in search of tin.

The ship is pursued by trading rivals and cannot shake them off so, rather than reveal the source of their wealth, the Phoenicians decide to steer for the rocks and sacrifice themselves:

‘This is no time for charms and mummeries,’ he said. ‘We’ve lived like men, and we’ll die like gentlemen for the honour and glory of Tyre, our splendid city. “Tyre, Tyre for ever! It’s Tyre that rules the waves.” I steer her straight for the Dragon rocks, and we go down for our city as brave men should. The creeping cowards who follow shall go down as slaves – and slaves they shall be to us when we live again. Tyre, Tyre for ever!’ (Nesbit, 1996:266)

Mark Girouard points out that the wreck of the Birkenhead in 1852 was one of the defining moments in the British Empire, when hundreds of men drowned as the women and children left in the boats. It was a troop ship and officers and men stood to attention as it sank. As with the Titanic, there were not enough lifeboats to go round. It was on the basis of episodes such as this that the claim of the British to be superior was founded, and it justified their ruling over others. Now the Tyrians may be wily since they have stolen the children’s compass but they die like English gentlemen. It might be objected that Edith Nesbit is liberal enough to allow other races to the dignity of empire builders and she recognises that in history there are empires other than the British. However, there are too many encounters with great civilisations for it to be a coincidence and the meetings handled too often with a sly subversive irony verging on the satirical for it to be by chance. The children march into the city of Babylon singing *The British Grenadiers*, announce themselves as the representatives of ‘The Empire on which the Sun never sets’ and demand to see the king. They give much the same treatment to the Pharaoh of Egypt. Then they present the technological marvels of the modern age in order to impress the credulous natives:

‘Well, they always take the savages beads and brandy, and stays and hats, and braces, and really useful things – things the savages haven’t got, and never heard about.’ (Nesbit, 1996:201)

As a sample of the most desirable objects of modern civilisation, ‘useful’ is perhaps not the word one would use. The children’s trade goods are a wonderful further *reductio ad absurdum*. Unfortunately the ancient cultures view the children with amused tolerance and they end up striking matches to keep drowsy emperors awake or singing to them, and very often they

land in jail, which they escape from just in the nick of time. In short, the roles are reversed and they are treated as the Empire treated the races it came into contact with – as curiosities. Indeed, the ancient civilisations often resemble modern Britain. This is how the Queen of Babylon speaks, describing the King's expedition to pick up his latest bride:

And he's gone in his best chariot, the one inlaid with lapis lazuli and gold, with the gold-plated wheels and onyx-studded hubs – much too great an honour in my opinion. She'll be here tonight; there'll be a grand banquet to celebrate her arrival. *She* won't be present, of course. She'll be having her baths and anointings, and all that sort of thing. We always clean our foreign brides very carefully. (Nesbit, 1996:117)

This might be the language of a society lady or any celebrity in its mixture of snobbery, jealousy and gossip. The humour and what it satirises do not date. The queen, however, when she visits London, has some well-chosen criticisms to make of Britain in her turn: 'but how badly you keep your slaves. How wretched and poor and neglected they seem.' She wonders why they do not all revolt but Cyril protests that they will not because they have the vote, which the Queen writes off with savage irony as 'a sort of plaything'. She wishes they were all well fed and well dressed, which since the Psammead (who can grant wishes) is at hand, comes true in an extraordinary fantasy sequence. The streets of London are suddenly filled with colour and abundant food much to the disgust of the Stock Exchange, who find out that it is the Queen's doing: 'Scandalous! Shameful! Ought to be put down by law'. The Queen wishes for her guards to protect her and, of course, they arrive and begin massacring the members of the Stock Exchange. Just as the fantasy is turning nasty someone wishes it was all a dream and the Psammead obliges but the satirical points remain. In *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, Edith attacks another bastion of capitalism when the phoenix pays a visit to the insurance firm that bears his name: the whole wonderful, ridiculous comedy ever attaining new heights of foolishness, as servility is added on servility and new ritual and religious imagery are brought in, with the phoenix pushing his followers into new flights of adoration to prove the strength of their faith. The phoenix is welcomed formally:

'We have met here today,' said the gentleman again, 'on an occasion unparalleled in the annals of this office. Our respected phoenix – 'Head of the House,' said the Phoenix in a hollow voice.

‘I was coming to that. Our respected Phoenix, the head of this ancient House, has at length done us the honour to come amongst us. I think I may say, gentlemen, that we are not insensible to this honour, and that we welcome with no uncertain voice one whom we have so long desired to see in our midst.’ (Nesbit, 1978:119)

Then follow three rousing cheers and a choral ode in praise of the phoenix, sung by all the clerks and employees and managers and secretaries and clerks.

Julia Briggs, in her excellent biography of Edith Nesbit, *Woman of Passion*, states that Edith presents her children in unmanageable conflicts with irate adults brought about by the use of magic:

She is realistically aware of the children’s lack of any power other than the power of imagination (Briggs, 1987:190)

And that power can sweeten the facts of life but cannot transmute ‘the irreducible chaos of experience’. However, it is possible to argue that Nesbit set such a high value upon the imagination that she believed it could compensate for the absence of religion. This would make her an inheritor of the Romantic programme to replace an extinct and oppressive Christianity by a theology which is profoundly influenced by the Greeks, in particular Plato, and sees this world as a vale of soul-making and the next as this life lived in a finer form. In *The Enchanted Castle*, the statues in the park come to life at night and transform the children into the forms of Greek gods and nymphs so that they can perform actions impossible to their human powers as children. In this divine guise, the children feast with the gods and take part in what can only be described as a religious vision:

Then a wave of intention swept over the mighty crowd. All the faces, bird, beast, greek statue, babylonian monster, human child and human lover, turned upward, the radiant light illumined them and one word broke from them all.

‘The light!’ they cried, and the sound of their voice was like the sound of a great wave; ‘the light! The light – ’ (Nesbit, 1979:250-1)

Now whether this is the promise of an apotheosis into a greater realm of being or the foretaste of a glorious extinction in the heart of life, in the manner of Wagner in *Tristan*, cannot be decided. But it is religious in its intention and a great influence on C.S. Lewis. In the Narnia sequence, we

find the same devotion to the figures of Greek and Roman mythology: fauns, nymphs and centaurs; the same delight in overflowing feasts and the same sense of an intoxicating even risky freedom from convention:

‘The boy with the wild face is Bacchus and the old one on the donkey is Silenus. Don’t you remember Mr. Tumnus telling us about them long ago?’

‘Yes, of course. But I say Lu – ’

‘What?’

‘I wouldn’t feel safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls if we’d met them without Aslan.’

‘I should think not,’ said Lucy. (Lewis, 2001:74)

One does feel like saying: ‘Gosh, how naughty!’ at this point. As A.N. Wilson pointed out about C.S. Lewis: ‘he wanted nothing less than a revival of the Romantic movement in literature, only a revival under Christian management.’ (Wilson, 1990:183). Childish rebellion is only permitted within the confines laid down by Aslan. Lewis shows where Aslan’s restrictions tend by concluding his Narnia sequence with a vision of judgement, resurrection and acceptance into Heaven. Narnia is a foretaste of heaven in that the children can enjoy life to an enhanced degree in particular sensuous pleasure, compared to life on earth. In heaven that sensuous delight is continued to include super human abilities and a vastly improved ability to enjoy them:

But before Jill had time to notice all these things fully, she was going up the waterfall herself. It was the sort of thing that would have been quite impossible in our world. Even if you hadn’t been drowned, you would have been smashed to pieces by the terrible weight of water against the countless jags of rock. But in that world you could do it you went on, up and up, with all kinds of reflected lights flashing at you from the water and all manner of coloured stones flashing through it, till it seemed as if you were climbing light itself – (Lewis, 2001:213)

The fundamental principle of heaven, according to Lewis, is that it is based on Plato’s idea that the reality the children know, whether in Narnia or in England, is but a poor copy of the original which is their reward in heaven. The mark of heaven is an increased capacity to wonder and to enjoy which we find in Nesbit, Lewis’s great original:

The children leaped up – and through the cloud came something that was certainly music, though it was so vague and far-away that the sharpest music-master you ever had could not make out the tune. But the rhythm of it was there, an insistent beat that made your feet long to keep time to it. And through the rhythm presently the tune pierced, as the sound of the pipes pierces the sound of the drums when you see the Church Brigade boys go by when you are on your holiday by the sea near their white-tented, happy camps. And that time the children's feet could not resist. They danced steps that they had not known they knew. And they knew, for the first time, the delight of real dancing. (Nesbit, 1987:223)

The same delight in intense sensuous experience is present, the same surpassing of usual skills and knowledge and the same belief in approaching revelation, as in Lewis. The same patterns of magical experience and experience of magical worlds can be found in later writers, including J.K. Rowling. There is the same sensuous delight in magic: Harry on a broomstick, playing Quidditch; the same borrowings from Greek mythology, centaurs and the like and the same purpose. If the children in Nesbit have to save the family and the Pevensys have to save Narnia, the children in Harry Potter have to save Hogwarts and Dumbledore who is the soul of Hogwarts. There is a world of the humdrum where the Dursleys live, the world of enhanced reality which is the world of magic and in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* Rowling is already hinting at a world beyond indicated by the flapping curtain through which Sirius goes when he dies and the voices which can be heard beyond it. It will be very interesting to see what vision she presents of the afterlife in her remaining books.

In *Woman of Passion*, Julia Briggs indicates that Edith Nesbit's friend H.G. Wells was very possibly the source of the idea for time travel and his novel *The Time Machine* establishes some of the principles of travelling through time such as the concept of different time duration between the various worlds. He also saw the dramatic possibilities inherent in the use of an instrument of travel which could be lost or stolen just when the hero needed it urgently. Nesbit uses all these but she establishes the full vocabulary for this type of fiction. Moreover, she creates the genre for children's writers. She brings into her fiction reference to the latest inventions such as the wireless and she does more: she incorporates the latest technology as a form of special effect in her description:

And in that broad oblong was a sort of shining, a faint sparkling movement, like the movement of the light on the sheet of a cinematograph before the pictures begin to show.....The light – broad, oblong – suddenly changed from mere light to figures, to movement. It was a living picture – rather like a cinematograph. (*The House Of Arden*. p193)

At the same time as using the wonders of the latest technology to evoke a sense of the miraculous, she humanises the means of magic so that whether Psammead or Phoenix or Mouldiwarp, they are unreliable or cantankerous and have to be placated, charmed or even bullied into securing entrance or exit between the worlds. Even when the means is inanimate it still seems to have a mind of its own and a malicious sense of humour so that using it simply leads to further complications which have to be unravelled before the original objective can be attained. Not only do the means have to be worked out and how it can be used reliably established but Time itself has to be understood so that it can be bent or outwitted in order that the children can arrive at their intended destination and get away before becoming subject to time and history.

Delight in playing with time and the problems that time travel impose can be seen in J.K. Rowling's work in Voldemort's diary or in Hermione's time-shifter which she uses to attend more lessons than humanly possible. Through the use of that time-shifter, Rowling does come up with an answer to a problem Nesbit raises in *The House of Arden* but never answers: is it possible for people from another time to go back into time and change history? In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Rowling shows convincingly how that might be done and the problems attendant upon doing it. Even so, Nesbit established the problem just as she laid down so many solutions for the use of those writers who came after and were attracted to the genre of time travel for children.

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## Reviews

***Introductions and Reviews* by D.H. Lawrence,  
edited by N.H. Reeve and John Worthen.  
(Cambridge University Press, £90)**

In a letter of September 1927, the publisher Jonathan Cape suggested to Lawrence that he might well put together a volume of critical writing which would include his introductions and reviews. This suggestion arose from Cape's reading of Lawrence's Introduction to Verga's *Mastro-don Gesualdo*:

Reading this introduction makes me wonder whether you will consider assembling in one volume some of your critical studies. I should think you would have enough to make a very attractive volume.

Although nothing came of this suggestion at the time, it was renewed by Cape in the spring of 1929 and was eagerly received by the writer whose illness left him barely enough strength to embark upon a new book which would have to be written from scratch. Had Lawrence lived long enough to put the design into action the ensuing volume might well have acted as a companion piece to the book of non-literary essays which were published posthumously as *Assorted Articles*. This current volume, edited by Reeve and Worthen, stands as a scholarly and handsome companion to Cambridge's *Late Essays and Articles* (reviewed in *The Use of English* 56/1, Autumn 2004) and brings together pieces which have only been formerly available in the two volumes of *Phoenix* 1936 and *Phoenix II* 1968. A number of the texts have been previously unpublished.

The most substantial inclusion in this book is the *Memoir of Maurice Magnus*, Lawrence's only extended piece of biographical writing. Having met Magnus, an American writer and entrepreneur, in Florence in the autumn of 1919 and again at the monastery of Montecassino in February 1920, Lawrence read the manuscript of *Memoirs of the Foreign Legion* which the American was hoping to get into print:

That evening he first showed me the Legion manuscript. He

had got it rather raggedly typed out. He had a type-writer, but felt he ought to have somebody to do his typing for him, as he hated it and did it unwillingly. That evening and when I went to bed and when I woke in the morning I read this manuscript. It did not seem very good—vague and diffuse where it shouldn't have been—lacking in sharp detail and definite event. And yet there was something in it that made me want it done properly. So we talked about it, and discussed it carefully, and he unwillingly promised to tackle it again. He was curious, always talking about his work, even always working, but never *properly* doing anything.

This tone of impatience, a typical register of Lawrence's concern for the importance of really engaged living, recurs a little later when he records some of the conversation between himself and the writer:

He seemed to understand so much, round about the questions that trouble one deepest. But the quick of the question he never felt. He had no real middle, no real centre bit to him. Yet, round and about all the questions, he was so intelligent and sensitive.

Lawrence's passionate belief in the intensity of the lived moment, with its homage to Blake's sight of eternity in a grain of sand, was placed succinctly at the end of his life in the late poem, "Thought":

Thought, I love thought.  
 But not the jaggling and twisting of already existent ideas  
 I despise that self-important game.  
 Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness,  
 Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of the  
 conscience,  
 Thought is gazing on to the face of life, and reading what can be  
 read,  
 Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to  
 conclusion.  
 Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges,  
 Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending.

That whole attention to placing individuals within a landscape that Lawrence does so well is evocatively caught in the description of the monastery at Montecassino where he visited Magnus in the cold winter of early 1920:

We went down to the end of the high white naked corridor. Magnus had quite a sumptuous room, with a curtained bed in one part, and under the window his writing desk with papers and photographs, and nearby a sofa and an easy table, making a little sitting room, while the bed and toilet things, pomades and bottles were all in the distance, in the shadow. Night was fallen. From the window one saw the world far below, like a pool the flat plain, a deep pool of darkness with little twinkling lights, and rows and bunches of light that were the railway station.

I drank my tea, Magnus drank a little liqueur, Don Martino in his black winter robe sat and talked with us. At least he did very little talking. But he listened and smiled and put in a word or two as we talked, seated round the table on which stood the green-shaded electric lamp.

The monastery was cold as the tomb. Couched there on top of its hill, it is not much below the winter snow-line. Now, by the end of January all the summer heat is soaked out of the vast, ponderous stone walls, and they become masses of coldness cloaking around. There is no heating apparatus whatsoever—none. Save the fire in the kitchen, for cooking, nothing. Dead, silent, stone cold everywhere.

The simplicity of the connection between ‘white naked corridor’ and the reference to ‘the winter snow-line’, the hint of comfort in the room with ‘curtained bed’, ‘sofa’, ‘easy table’ and its contrast with ‘ponderous stone walls’ and ‘coldness cloaking’ make this short description vivid with atmosphere. There are touches of Chardin in the evocation of simplicity and it might repay comparing the scene with the 1731 painting in the Louvre, ‘The Fast-day Meal’.

In the 1926 review of William-Carlos-Williams’s *In The American Grain*, Lawrence declares that ‘All creative art must rise out of a specific soil and flicker with a spirit of place’ and it is not at all surprising that he should have admired a book which has such a concrete quality of localisation. Williams’s own introductory comments to his series of studies emphasise the importance of direct focus, the wish ‘to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation.’ Lawrence’s review also makes clear the distinction between the local and the parochial:

The local, of course, in Mr. Williams's sense, is the very opposite of the parochial, the parish-pump stuff. The local in America is America itself. Not Salem, or Boston, or Philadelphia, or New York, but that of the America subsoil which spouts up in any of those places into the lives of men.

It is also, perhaps, Lawrence's concern for the local that drew him to the Sicilian novels of Giovanni Verga which he had begun reading after returning to Taormina in October 1921. Thinking about translating Verga, Lawrence wrote to Edward Garnett in November insisting that the Sicilian novelist is 'extraordinarily good—peasant—quite modern—Homeric—and it would need someone who could absolutely handle English in the dialect, to translate him.' In 1922 he finished translating *Mastro-don-Gesualdo* and wrote an introductory essay which again contemplates the difference between the local and the parochial:

*Mastro-don-Gesualdo* is a great realistic novel of Sicily, as *Madame Bovary* is a great realistic novel of France. They both suffer from the defects of the realistic method. I think the inherent flaw in *Madame Bovary*—though I hate talking about flaws in great books; but the charge is really against the realistic method—is that individuals like Emma and Charles Bovary are too insignificant to carry the full weight of Gustave Flaubert's profound sense of tragedy; or, if you will, of tragic futility. Emma and Charles Bovary are two ordinary persons, chosen because they *are* ordinary. But Flaubert is by no means an ordinary person. Yet he insists on pouring his own deep and bitter tragic consciousness into the little skins of the country doctor and his dissatisfied wife. The result is a certain discrepancy, even a certain dishonesty in the attempt to be too honest. By choosing ordinary people as the vehicles of an extraordinarily passionate feeling of bitterness, Flaubert loads the dice, and wins by a trick which is sure to be found out against him.

Reading this sort of comment, it is no wonder that Jonathan Cape thought that a collection of Lawrence's critical studies would make a very attractive volume. It does!

**Ian Brinton**

***Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent  
Narratives Since 1945, by Rachel Falconer.*  
(Edinburgh University Press, £45)**

Hell is not what it used to be (a place of justified punishment), and some would like it back. 'To have neither Heaven nor Hell is to be intolerably deprived and alone in a world gone flat', argued George Steiner. With Heaven above and Hell below, you at least knew where you were; but when the Vatican surrendered to modernity (in 1999), Hell became what Marlowe's Dr Faustus said it was, a fable. 'Hell is not a "place", nor a punishment imposed by God', a Papal statement decreed, 'but a self-exclusion from communion with God'.

But for Rachel Falconer, in an informative and closely argued study, Hell is more than a metaphor: it's a going concern. She unearths a recent article triumphantly entitled 'Weep and Gnash Those Teeth: Hell's Back', and reminds us that the 'evangelical denominations' are not short of fire-and-brimstone zealots. The word Hell is common currency for the horror of some experience or event; and countless novels, films, poems and plays produced in the apparently secular West draw their images and motifs from 'the Catholic Baroque inferno'. Even science, with its black holes and invisible dark matter, is said to support 'the concept of the infernal abyss': one strange paragraph records that the black hole closest to earth, near the star Vega and 'about the size of Los Angeles', has been named Hades. The abyss surrounds us, as I suspected all along. But the most disturbing evidence is drawn from the all too verifiable facts of what T.S. Eliot called 'the immense panorama of anarchy and futility which is contemporary history'. There is no gainsaying the argument that the twentieth century, from the Great War to the Holocaust, 'makes it hard for us to do without a concept of Hell.'

Falconer's chief interest is in the 'katabatic narrative', or what we know from medieval literature as the 'descent into Hell'. The 'infernal journey narrative' comes in all shapes and guises, and the author showers us with examples from Western tradition, but the central figure is of course Dante, who 'combined the ancient Greek and Roman with the medieval Christian traditions'. The Judeo-Christian Hell derives in part from the classical underworld, and the two strands can't easily be disentangled; but coming to the modern period Falconer makes a broad and useful distinction that reflects 'the way people think about Hell':

On one side are those who think something of value can be gained from the descent to Hell; on the other are those who

think that the experience is purely negative, indeed that to transform suffering and loss into something positive is unethical.

The first school can be traced to classical tradition, for here ‘the descent to Dis or Hades is about coming to know the self, regaining something or someone lost, or acquiring super-human powers or knowledge’. For the second, the descent is valueless—eternal torment without religion’s traditional rationale: this, she suggests, ‘would appear to be the secular fallout from the Judeo-Christian belief in Hell’.

Rachel Falconer herself seems to favour the redemptive rather than the ‘no-value’ school; her motto might be Hardy’s ‘if a way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst’. Obsessed with 9/11, she thinks that things are getting worse, and that it’s time we looked a bit more closely into the abyss. She takes issue, for instance, with Jean Lyotard and Jacques Derrida who (oh so predictably) would like us to believe that no survivor’s record can be trusted since the naïve ‘language of knowledge’ is at odds with the ‘truth-work’ of Deconstruction. She wants her hero to return, if not with super-human knowledge, then with wisdom of some sort; say that of the alter-ego in what is perhaps the best-known modern example of ‘classical katabasis’ (though not mentioned here), Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,  
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell...  
‘...And of my weeping something had been left,  
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled...’

She stipulates ‘three movements’ (the usual requirement) in her qualifying narratives, ‘a descent, an inversion or turning upside down at a zero point and a return to the surface of some kind’, but sets no limits on subject matter. Freud’s unconscious is an underground of sorts, and ch. 5 takes us ‘Down the rabbit hole’ of *Alice* to explore certain ‘katabatic memoirs’ of mental illness: Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*, written a quarter of a century after a two-year stay at McLean’s Psychiatric Hospital in Boston and with the help of a 350-page patient file extracted from the authorities by a lawyer; Carol North’s *Welcome, Silence*, an account of the ‘nether world’ of schizophrenia, and Lauren Slater’s *Spasm: a Memoir with Lies*, which believe it or not is ‘an autobiography of epilepsy told by an unreliable narrator’. Even the footnotes are exciting. But other chapters—on the Hell of patriarchy (or is it capitalism?) in Gloria Naylor, Marge Piercy and Alice Notley, the ‘Postmodern Hell’ of Alasdair Gray, and the

‘Orphean’ underworld of Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*—leave us reflecting on the difference between a memoir and a fiction, a real and an imaginary Hell.

The most impressive thing in *Hell in Contemporary Literature* is the discussion of *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi’s account of his twenty-month incarceration in Auschwitz, and *The Truce*, the story of his return. The two books, effectively a single work, make an overwhelming impact on the reader; but they also respond to close analysis, and the present study brings out the subtlety, the ‘productive intersection of perspectives’ of Levi’s method. Take his authorial viewpoint. Instead of the two selves (before and after) of conventional autobiography, he gives us three: the naïve 24-year-old newcomer to Auschwitz, the hardened 25-year-old veteran or *vecchio*, and the 27-year-old narrator. Each of these ‘characters’ holds a radically different world-view, and ‘all three perspectives are subject to ironic deflation of critique by each other’. Falconer’s example is from the opening page of *If This Is a Man*—the capture of his disorganized band of partisans by the Fascist Militia:

At that time I had not yet been taught the doctrine I was later to learn so hurriedly in the Lager [at Auschwitz]: that man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means, while he who errs but once pays dearly.

The irony of this sentence, at least on a second reading, cuts two ways: ‘the *vecchio* mocks the new inmate, inferring that his punishment is ‘justified’ (p. 19) but the survivor-witness invites us to condemn the *vecchio*’s wisdom, insisting on a different system of values. The ‘university’ of Auschwitz thus instigates an unceasing dialogue between world-views that are in many respects irreconcilable and incompatible. The tragic knowledge acquired in Auschwitz, banishing the young idealist for ever, had meaning only there.

*If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* bring a tradition to its end. Some time after his return to Turin on 19 October 1945, Primo Levi began to dream that he was back in the camp: ‘I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream...’. It is the converse of his tragic knowledge, a realisation that Auschwitz is in a different sense the *only* reality; and it’s hard to see how, after this, the classical or Christian Hell could be re-invented.

Which, if any, of the ‘descent narratives’, the ‘infernal journeys’ and ‘dystopic’ fantasies that come up for air in *Hell in Contemporary Literature* survives the inevitable comparison with Levi? The author of this study

largely avoids questions of value, and for understandable reasons; but is it enough to say that Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, a sprawling and pretentious Gothic nightmare which requires not so much the suspension as the forcible repression of disbelief, 'raises many questions about narrative coherence and integrity'? And what about the reader's rights when it comes to Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*, a verbal assault in which "every single phrase" "is set" "inside double quotation marks"? The critic leans over backwards, or even further: 'The quotation marks around Alette's narration thus reinforce the point that she is a constructed character, that what integrity she achieves is provisional and relational'; and when she observes that Notley's work 'might even be described as anti-language', she doesn't mean to dispraise it. Rachel Falconer is generous to a fault, and her impressive scholarship does for some of her writers what they fail to do for themselves.

## John Constable

### ***Laughing Matters*, by Stephen Jacobi. (Random House £10.99)**

'*Laughing Matters*' is not a funny book. It chronicles the three-month journey made by Stephen Jacobi, a novelist and journalist, in his research into the art of comedy as he observes it in the theatres, clubs and bars across the United Kingdom and, for one spell, in downtown New York. What separates the book from falling into the category of voyeurish research, is that Jacobi puts himself on trial after a brief period of night class tuition. He is mentored as much by other trialists as by himself as he grapples with the despairs and elations of the comic performer. In a similar vein to Trevor Griffiths' play *The Comedians*, the book deals with the backstage solitude of the clown, where the smiles and tears combine, where theory meets sharp-toothed practice and where wit is required to overcome rejection and the puncturing of the ego's confidence.

The reader will admire Jacobi's courage and pluck as he exposes his homespun comic routine to the bear pits he encounters during the course of this journey and learn to sympathize with the deliberate anguish he sets up for himself. As his partner, Pippa, reminds him before he embarks

“You’re not funny”, the reader too is pressed to acknowledge that he is on a lost cause. However, what makes the book an intelligible, often vibrantly moving read, is the author’s estimation of both himself and the world in which he has dared to enter. Beyond the stage, there are some wonderfully articulated and perceptive insights into the world of hotel rooms, city streets, traffic jams and the provinces. These are underpinned by the novelist’s reference to the literary and comic inheritance on which so much of the humour of the “British” kind depends. Serious research is therefore set off against the unpredictable reception of his routine. The written form of the latter is (cleverly) delayed until the appendix so we are often left with the fore and aftermath of his performance and the state of his feelings and denied the opportunity to judge his script.

The jaunty nature of much of the prose in the book is mirrored in most of the chapter titles: “Beside the Seaside”, “Not Funny”, “Dead Funny”, “Cheeky Monkey”, and the repeated “Up the Creek” in the first and last chapter completes the sense of defeatism which the author has been at pains to resist. Towards the end, there’s one glorious exchange with a drunken heckler, artfully drawn, in the darkest of London clubs, where the thin line between the serious and the comic finally snaps.

This is an excellent and entertaining book, delightfully ironic, acutely well observed and full of a real sense of mischief. It has wit, energy and as an exploration into an uncannily elusive art form, it contains much of genuine value.

### **Simon Northcote-Green**

#### ***The Force of Language*, by Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley. (Palgrave Macmillan, £50)**

According to the joint authors of *The Force of Language*, their book is an attempt to develop ‘a Marxist form of pragmatics’ (Jean-Jacques Lecercle) or as Denise Riley puts it, ‘a socialist philosophy of language’. According to Lecercle, this involves at the very least a commitment to the following radical theses:

The main thesis of our concept of language, language is a form of praxis, is developed in *four positive theses*: (1) Language

is a historical phenomenon. (2) Language is a social phenomenon. (3) Language is a material phenomenon. (4) Language is a political phenomenon.

However, an initial problem presents itself straight away: how radical or original are these ‘theses’? Lecerclé seems to think, to take just one example, that his theorising involves a rejection of Saussure, but would Saussure necessarily have disagreed with any of these propositions? Saussure’s point was that we need to focus on *langue* as a synchronic psychological phenomenon if we wish to study language scientifically. But that is hardly the same thing as denying any of Lecerclé’s truisms. Nevertheless, the attempt to shift the emphasis away from the Saussurean/Chomskyan model is certainly laudable; the difficulty is that the authors’ Marxist model with its relentless emphasis upon the social creates as many problems as it solves.

Denise Riley is responsible for the first two chapters, and she attempts to demonstrate the truth of two propositions: first, that self-communication (‘inner speech’) is misunderstood if we think of it as something essentially private or personal, because, according to her, all signs are social; and, second, that ‘bad words’ do not qualify as language at all. But both of these arguments are problematic. The difficulty with her argument about self-communication is that she completely fails even to discuss the numerous instances of signs that do not appear to be ‘social’ at all, from the knot in my handkerchief, to the secret notebook in which I record my medical symptoms using a private system of signs, to the curious passages in the diary kept by Samuel Pepys in which he appears to record his sexual experiences using what one commentator has described as a jumble of ‘garbled foreign phrases’. In what sense are any of these signs ‘social’? At the very least this question needed to be addressed. Both authors rely heavily upon Wittgenstein’s arguments, but it would be somewhat rash to assume without further ado that Wittgenstein was right about the impossibility of a ‘private language’.

In her second chapter, Riley worries away at what she calls ‘bad words’, which, for Riley, includes many kinds of hurtful or damaging speech, including the phenomenon of what has come to be known as ‘hate speech’. In the wake of 9/11 and the rise of religious fundamentalism in general, issues like incitement to religious hatred or the problematic distinction between causing offence and causing harm are looming very large indeed in our society: they must be addressed – urgently – as matters of the very highest importance. But instead of addressing these crucial problems, Riley appears to offer a bizarre self-help manual which involves a complicated step-by-step psychological process, intended to nullify the

effects of hurtful speech on its recipient. In essence, the process involves taking seriously the implausible claim that hate speech is ‘only formally language, and scarcely that at all’; or in an alternative – and even more baffling – formulation, ‘I can inform the malignant word that it is not really a word’. Again: ‘I can kill it [sc. the hurtful word] only by artificially abstracting it from the realm of language altogether’. Once that has been done, then, allegedly, hate speech loses its power over us. In order to reduce our psychic anguish we are, of course, at liberty to tell ourselves any sort of story we like, but as a serious examination of such a crucially important phenomenon, this strikes me as somewhat inadequate, to say the least. Further, one might be forgiven for suspecting that ‘bad words’ have to be banished from the realm of the linguistic altogether because the hurtful or harmful consequences of a speech act can only be calculated in each *individual* case, hence the authors’ preferred *social* model begins to look less than convincing as a comprehensive account of how language works.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle is responsible for the rest of the book. Unfortunately, in a variety of ways, his section is as problematic as Riley’s. His grasp of linguistic theory is certainly pretty shaky at times. He argues, for example, in the following terms:

the fact that language is a collective praxis does not mean that the subject is powerless: she acts on and in language by enacting it; every speech-act, however conventional, being an act of *parole*, moves *langue* a tiny fraction along its historical path, even if *langue* as a whole is beyond the reach of deliberate or even collective enterprise.

He claims that this theoretical move means rejecting not only Saussure and Chomsky, but ‘the whole history of linguistics since its foundation as a science’. But Lecercle’s paradoxical formulation (the speaking subject, we are told, is not ‘powerless’ to contribute to the development of the language, but we are also assured that *langue* is beyond the reach of either the individual or the collectivity) echoes precisely Saussure’s profound grasp of the apparently contradictory nature of languages:

The passage of time, which ensures the continuity of a language, also has another effect, which appears to work in the opposite direction. It allows linguistic signs to be changed with some rapidity. Hence variability and invariability are both, in a certain sense, characteristic of the linguistic sign. (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916)

The reader is being misled if he believes that Lecerle's re-cycling of this venerable argument is in any way original or marks a break with structural linguistics.

The confidence of the reader is undermined even further by Lecerle's apparent inability to maintain a consistent argument. For example, Lecerle – rightly in my view – sees standard English as a mythical concept, concocted for political purposes: 'Standard English' is an ideological construction and a political imposition'. From this, the conclusion follows that 'There are no independent 'rules' of grammar, available for the whole community'. Finally, he exhorts the reader to rise up in linguistic revolt: 'Minority speakers of the world, unite – that is the slogan of the linguistic class-struggle, the pervading nature of which should now be apparent'. All well and good, except that this hardly squares with his own ultra-conservative approach to linguistic normativity: 'The grammar of the noun 'dispute' demands that it take a prepositional phrase beginning with 'between', not an agent beginning with 'by', as its complement'. Demands? Where does this demand come from, if not a belief in the existence of a standard language and grammar which speakers have no choice but to obey?

The strongest part of the book is when Lecerle takes on Chomsky in a chapter appropriately headed 'The Concept of Language We Don't Need'. I particularly enjoyed the paragraph in which Lecerle demolishes the oft-repeated generativist 'argument' that language must somehow be innate because

linguistic knowledge is under-determined by experience and learning – an argument strongly reminiscent of the cosmological argument for the existence of God: the universe is too complex not to have been designed by a holy engineer. No wonder Chomsky is sometimes called a linguist for creationists.

His comments about the implausible 'examples' of linguistic 'data' analysed by generativists are also very sharp.

Lecerle cites Chomsky's reported comment that analysing political rhetoric has no place in linguistics, and – in my view, rightly – balks at such a critical omission. Indeed he goes on to offer interesting analyses of some egregious examples of political spin and bias. For example, he deftly examines a sentence uttered by a reporter on the national news ('The dispute by the health workers is now in its third week'). He argues that the unusual use of 'by' rather than 'between' after the word *dispute* is

far from being ‘innocent’:

It exonerates the other side in the dispute from the inconvenience to the general public caused by the strike; it ascribes the sole responsibility of the strike and its continuation to the workers; and it even manages to avoid the word ‘strike’, as emotionally and politically charged. In other words, our sentence isolates the striking health workers and interpellates us, the audience, into consumers and taxpayers potentially incensed by the breakdown of a public service.

He is also understandably scathing about an alleged incident (reported by the British press) in an interview for a job in the civil service in which a woman was asked what her husband would do for sex if she were to be offered the job and was then obliged to go away on a business trip. But once again the issue of originality rears its head. Analysing spin – rhetoric as it used to be known – is hardly something new, as Denise Riley implicitly admits in the very first chapter of this book when she cites the words of Bishop Butler: ‘Language is, in its very nature, inadequate, ambiguous, liable to infinite abuse, even from negligence; *and so liable to it from design that every man can deceive and betray by it*’ (emphasis added).

On a very personal note, I must confess that I found the authors’ styles pretty unappealing. The following offering is not untypical of the book as a whole:

One solution to this quandary is a philosophy of reversal, which decides that the inside is in fact outside, that linguistic structure is there, on the surface, that the depths of human psyche are superficial and public. This would imply a philosophy of immanence, rejecting both the transcendence of Platonist ideas or of God as *nomothetes*, and the inverse transcendence of the depths of the unconscious or of deep structure. The Deleuzian concept of the plane of immanence may be of use here.

At times I was even reminded of P.G. Wodehouse’s well-aimed parody of philosophical writing in his novel *Joy in the Morning* (published in 1947). Bertie Wooster, it will be recalled, had been instructed by his over-bearing girlfriend to read a weighty tome entitled *Types of Ethical Theory*. Wodehouse gives us a little taster to show why Bertie is so reluctant to read it:

Of the two antithetic terms in the Greek philosophy one only was real and self-subsisting; and that one was Ideal Thought as opposed to that which it has to penetrate and mould. The other, corresponding to our Nature, was in itself phenomenal, unreal, without any permanent footing, having no predicates that held true for two moments together; in short, redeemed from negation only by including in-dwelling realities appearing through.

I would like to offer the following practical suggestion: all philosophers and linguistic theorists should be forced to pin this passage from Wodehouse above their desks as a terrible warning of what can happen when the imperative to be as clear as possible (Lecerle unsurprisingly dismisses this demand as 'a form of fetishism') is ignored.

**Stephen Farrow**

***Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations,*  
by Peter Robinson. (OUP, £50)**

Peter Robinson's third book of criticism collects and revises a series of his occasional essays published between 1986 and 2003, presenting them as a sustained enquiry. His collection explores a dilemma posed by two questions put by the philosopher Thomas Nagel in his 1990 Locke lectures: 'How should we live, whatever the circumstances?' and 'Under what circumstances is it possible to live as we should?' Robinson draws on some interesting reading in philosophy, often from Wittgenstein, to pursue these questions, but he argues that attentive, accurate interpretation of the poetry of our times can also provide solutions to Nagel's dilemma: 'One of the ways .... to gain a textured understanding of our selves in their situations, so as to ask questions about the world and how to live in it, is to read poetry.' Is this statement much more than a general rubric under which to assemble an interesting miscellany of chapters? But to follow Robinson's argument is to be taken through a singular selection of poems, and there won't be many readers of this study who do not learn a good deal, either about poets with whose work they are already acquainted, or about texts that will be quite new to them. A

question for collections such as these must always be: Why these poems and poets and not others? Wouldn't Les Murray help the case? How might John Ashbery qualify it? Some kind of explicit rationale for the choices made would have been interesting, but the essays do help us to read and contextualise Robinson's own poetic enterprise, well-represented in his *Selected Poems* from Carcanet (2003) [reviewed in *Use of English* 54/3 Summer 2003].

Peter Robinson's first chapters examine aspects of poems composed at critical moments in their author's lives, and which, by his argument, call for an understanding of their immediate contexts, both biographical and more generally social. These are William Empson's 'Aubade', Ezra Pound's 'Villanelle: The Psychological Hour', two ballads from 1930 by Basil Bunting, Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*, and W.S. Graham's 'The Nightfishing'. Discussions of work by Elizabeth Bishop and Allen Curnow are concerned with 'the poetic shaping of the often painful or difficult insights which may come of expatriation or travel'. Peter Robinson himself has lived and written about his own experiences of 'expatriation' in Italy and Japan since leaving England in the 1980s, so as with all critical writing by creative poets, it is difficult not to look for the author's own agendas, perhaps not fully apparent to the poet himself, in the secondary discourse of his criticism. Chapters on Charles Tomlinson and Mairi MacInnes, who may be for many readers one of the welcome discoveries offered by the book, consider poetry and place through the medium of translation and imaginative displacement. A discussion of Tom Raworth's early poetry in relation to Pop Art 'examines the renewal of interest in early and classic modernist procedures during the 1950s and 1960s', and the final chapter on Roy Fisher provides a suitably eschatological finale, considering 'last things and the treatment of the dead in poems'.

Robinson's scrupulous reading of Pound's 'Villanelle: The Psychological Hour' seeks to place the poem in a moment of crisis for the poet himself, and provides persuasive detail and intertextual references in support. For Robinson, Pound's poem is a diagnosis of a problem that he may have felt himself to be suffering from; namely, a too aestheticized, psychologized, and depoliticized concept of good art. In this sense, the 'Villanelle' ... is a forerunner of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*'. It's hard to argue with the findings or readings here, as with his careful biographical and political placing of Empson's 'Aubade' in the first chapter. But to quote a remark by Wittgenstein that Robinson does not cite, 'Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.' Robinson's interpretations are realist and biographical, perhaps reflecting the current

success of literary biography both as a genre and way of reading, but are they made at the expense of poetry's non-referential dimensions? A position to set in dialogue with this kind of reading would be Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester UP, 1978), which heroically proposed to counter all 'bad naturalization' in the reading of poetry, since 'Contemporary poetry has suffered from critics' disposition to make poetry above all a statement about the external world ... Poetry can only be a valid and valuable activity when we recognise the value of the artifice which makes it different from prose.'

In fact one of Peter Robinson's most distinctive contributions in these readings is his persistent focus on the shaping of lines, rhythm and diction in direct response to immediate contexts and meaning. His discussion of MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* is a particularly striking example of attention to poetic form and political circumstances: 'The flexibility of *Autumn Journal's* quatrains, in relation to the Munich crisis, generates literary occasions in which ordinary utterances can express the anxiety and anguish of the moment, while simultaneously discovering a shape that counteracts that "chattering terror".' This reading of MacNeice makes his *Autumn Journal* seem like a more interestingly vulnerable response to critical times than Eliot's slightly later, more hieratic performance in *Four Quartets*, but does this make it a better poem?

W.S. Graham declared 'The poet or painter steers his life to maim / Himself somehow for the job' in his wonderful elegy to Peter Lanyon, the Cornish painter 'killed in a gliding accident 1964'. Robinson's Chapter Five, 'Dependence in W.S. Graham', considers the punishing isolation of Graham's own chosen route for writing. The independence of Graham's life was dearly bought, and for Robinson becomes a necessary condition for the independence of his poetic achievement. As Graham finely wrote in his 'Notes on a Poetry of Release', 'Let us endure the sudden affection of the language', and Robinson is at his best when he demonstrates the canny tactics by which Graham invokes and involves a putative reader, for example in his epistolary poems to painter-contemporaries such as Lanyon, Bryan Winter, and Roger Hilton, and, most movingly, to his wife Nessie Dunsmore. These poems, 'like his questions that do not presume or imply an answer, depend not on describing or assuming what the addressee should be like, but on finding her inviolable and inscrutable:

I leave this at your ear for when you wake,  
A creature in its abstract cage asleep.  
Your dreams blindfold you by the light they make.'

With 'Tom Raworth and the Pop Art Explosion' Peter Robinson demonstrates the inclusive range of his poetic sympathies since you might imagine that Raworth's form of neo-avant-garde practice would be alien to Robinson's own aesthetic. Robinson's poems are written with a biographical realism, as you might expect from his critical emphases, and always offer what linguisticians call 'cohesion', the frank possibility of resolved meanings, even if these are often enigmatic. Raworth's commitment is to a writing without conscious control or agenda so that the act of writing and reading becomes the effort to find cohesion, or experience the discontinuities of perception, memories, and experience itself: 'I really have no sense of questing for knowledge. At all. My idea is to go the other way, you know. And to be completely empty and then see what sounds.' Robinson's essay on Raworth is genuinely helpful, carefully exploring the critical debates around his radical practice and finding that 'his work has not succumbed to an attitudinizing intelligence which would seek to valorize either the discontinuous or the continuous at the expense of the other.' The final chapter of this collection is a poignant discussion of Roy Fisher's 'sustained preoccupation with last things', and perhaps draws on Robinson's own recent experiences, about which he has movingly written in poems such as 'Before an Operation', 'A Burning Head' and 'Convalescent Days' [see his *Selected Poems*, pp. 81-8].

Peter Robinson's criticism is enviably informed, and his knowledge of recent and contemporary poetry in English embraces an impressively wide range of work; he also appears to know Italian, French and Spanish poetry well. Not many academic critics can claim as much. Robinson's commitment to the value and importance of poetry is admirable, and these essays frequently demonstrate the unique pleasures and insights that careful reading of ambitious poetry can give, an art form which, as Elizabeth Bishop wrote, has always been 'expressly spared' throughout the ages, precisely because it cannot be commuted into commercial or mass-popular banality.

[Note: This book is generally well edited but the adjectival 'Twentieth century' in the title lacks a hyphen on both the dust jacket and title page; this may be a new design convention, although the phrase is hyphenated throughout the text itself. The inner cover flap also lists Peter Robinson's 'criticism' among his works, and it may be that OUP needs to sharpen its design and editorial oversight here.]

**Nigel Wheale**

***Miscanthus: Selected and New Poems by Anthony Barnett.*  
(Shearsman Books, £11.95)**

Each generation since the mid-Victorian era has produced a literary avant-garde that has become recognised, accepted and eventually established as part of the canon. This process is by no means uniform and involves the filtering out of many styles and approaches along the way. Anthony Barnett's work is becoming recognised and accepted. It appears in *A Various Art* (1987) edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville; *Poets on Writing: Britain 1970-1991* (1992) edited by Denise Riley and *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (1999) edited by Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain. The work of J.H. Prynne, John Riley, Peter Riley, Iain Sinclair, Tom Raworth, Lee Harwood and others from Barnett's generation is similarly in the process of becoming recognised and accepted. Barnett has translated Norwegian, Swedish, French and Italian poetry and, as part of Allardyce, Barnett, has published a range of international poetry, music books and edited the journal, *Fable Bulletin: Violin Improvisation Studies*. He has worked as a percussionist in the 1970s and as a visiting scholar at Meiji University, Tokyo in 2002.

*Miscanthus: Selected and New Poems*, edited with an Introduction by Xavier Kalck, forms another part of that process of recognition and acceptance. Building on the Collected Poems entitled *The Resting Bell* (1987), *Miscanthus* draws upon work from six subsequent volumes and adds new poems from two sequences 'And When I Sleep I Do Not Weep' and 'Florna'. Kalck's selection begins from Barnett's fifth collection *Blood Flow* (1975). Barnett's work from the mid to late seventies is well represented. It is work that resonates in its purity of language. The poems are marked by a balanced of positioned language in short, condensed utterances where the unsaid, the spaces between the words, is as crucial as what is said. It is work that demands close attention to each word and punctuation and, with its beguiling brevity, works well in a classroom of sixth-formers. *Mud Settles* (1977) consists of a sequence of thirty four short (3-11 lines) units that move through a seemingly knowing narrative self, alive to the elemental and natural world, experiencing a disrupted perception of self and other. Successive units introduce new elements within a conflict between the self and other. There is

Conflict between  
what attracts  
and what is already close (page 63)

This is followed by an unfeeling rose that 'stays in the cold' and in the

next unit:

Blood dries on the hot sand.  
 Blood of my beloved.  
 But you are nowhere  
 to be heard. (page 64)

The violence of the contracted self and disrupted other simultaneously can be read as a nature versus culture dichotomy and struggle between the sexes or individuals. It is a raw struggle with 'a trembling at every rise' and

A terrible orchestra of contradiction  
 and expansion - (page 76)

that holds a balanced tension of meaning throughout.

From *Report to the Working Party. Asylum. Otiose* (1979) through *A White Mess* (1981), *Moving Buildings* (1982) to *North, North, I Said, No, Wait a Minute, South, Oh, I Don't Know (148 Political Poems)* (1985), Barnett's work becomes more spare, heightened to pitch and resonant. It is the work's brevity that arrests the reader and demands attention. Barnett is able to render a few words into a high pitch, as in 'Not Godlike' (page 90):

No  
 -  
 the poet is not god  
 you know this  
 and since god was not there  
 say the poet is  
 as ordinary as you are  
 sanguine, fearful and un-  
 loved,  
 you know this.

Through such brevity, the words 'sanguine, fearful and un- / loved' have to carry great weight. It is Barnett's skill that they do and are memorable. He is able to write with pristine clarity producing a stunning image, as in the poem 'Imperfect Faith' (page 93), and compress material to an effective one line or two. There are only a few English poets capable of this level of intensity. One thinks of Thomas A. Clark, Lee Harwood, and John Riley and in a different vein the throwaway comedic lines of Tom Raworth. The mature Barnett poem offers an exemplary weight to each word utilised. It is knowing, playful, fretful, beguiling and sometimes elliptical. It utilises repetition in the manner of an improvising jazz musician. The *Quiet Facts* (1979) section combines compact simplicity within a poetic movement that echoes the preoccupation of *Mud Settles* with greater compression. By selecting short phrases Barnett focuses attention both on the individual words, their most obvious social meaning as well as their other possible meanings. There are twenty numbered units each comprising a few words that carry some reference to a social and domestic life and the elemental and natural world. Significantly, they are shorn of references to historical time and place is located through reference to minimal detail, 'The Corsican pine', 'drift wood', 'Sandalwood', 'Salt' and 'The gull'. The sequence moves through the domestic, with an unidentified addressee, to an implicitly alienated social and political world through a series of perceptual and psychological moments. As exact relationships are only implied by tenuous possibility the openness of the poetry is held through the bulk of the sequence. It is perhaps let down by reliance upon the use of the unmediated pronoun 'we' that leads to an ultimate closure. However, there is a haunting beauty to the sequence that holds a firm grip on the reader.

You  
tremble for another.

For a moment, and  
for another moment.

We know and we understand  
without knowing the burden.

We say you are a friend  
who understands. (page 116)

The following sequence *A White Mess* (1981) is perhaps less successful with its use of a telling rather than showing narrative self. Contemplative of spring, a first person narrative self looks at the world and a disrupted other. There is less mediation and more ellipsis producing a partial imbalance. *Little Stars And Straw Breasts* (1993) returns to the familiar territory of distance and disrupted communication between a narrative self and other, in this case a lover. Here forty-two units of 4-9 lines employing from 6-20 words, mostly around 12-16 words, allow some tight metonymical writing to be unleashed. The spaces between each unit allows not only duration, the passing of time, but also a crucial movement beyond the previous unit in spatial terms as well. The gradual filtering of detail in each unit produces a cumulative impact and power. Barnett also takes advantage of the structure to add commentary outside the narrative action that draws in other levels of reference.

Doesn't the etymology  
of two symbols sound  
(metaphorically) like  
sound as (metonymically)  
a pair of cymbals?

Then a great clash.

*Carp and Rubato* (1995) embraces a fuller line and prose. Whilst it lacks the convergence of earlier work it does show a development in his use of form and music, as in 'Aching Bones':

In sufficient shelter, in sufficient space. Your  
symmetry, your chance, your perfect alibi, your  
lame excuse. Silent, incoherent properties of rock.  
Upset and set up. Welcoming, unwelcoming.  
Aroma, Aurora. Flowers. Flares. (page 199)

Barnett's late 1990s work shows much more reliance upon prose and is less dramatic. Some of the subsequent poems published for the first time show a return to the qualities upon which Barnett's reputation is based. Here is 'Often By A River':

The scent  
Under the rose  
  
Broken vessels

Mistakes and I cup my face in my hands

Often where a river

Guilty of reeds and olive stupidity

Turns and runs

Reparations

Locked and looked up

You are so lovely

Always clearing the throat (page 243)

Barnett is undoubtedly at his best an inspiring poet and one whose stature may well continue to grow. The weakness in his poetry is the use of an unmediated narrative self without a wider context to its unreliability or alienation from itself or others. There is also an occasional reliance upon the prosaic and rhetorical. Its great strength is its openness to the world. It is in this sense child-like and alive. It offers students an opportunity to examine relationships to language and to see the stark richness and potential of small units of language. There are no difficult words and meanings here.

The curves,

The occurrences.

They do not harden for us.

The wind rips the branches.

Sighs, and sighs

Turning into mother blackbirds. (page 117)

It is entirely possible to follow the lesions, edges, juxtapositions that Barnett utilises to reach a notion of what the poems mean. There are some poems that resist immediate meaning through the sheer joy of their music and openness. It is also possible through these poems to conceive of the world as a set of shortened or inexplicable connections and struggles. Such a world-view is not entirely inimical to the current generation of texting teenagers.

### **David Caddy**

***Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara, edited by Donald Allen.*  
(Carcanet Press £9.95)**

In the Poetry Pléiade series Carcanet have just reissued this handsomely presented edition of the selected poems of one of the most intriguing figures of twentieth-century American poetry. The volume contains an excellent selection of O'Hara's most important poems and the editor, Donald Allen, makes it clear in his Preface how difficult a task that selection procedure turned out to be:

After devoting the better part of three years (five would have been even better) to the erection of the splendid palace known as *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, it at first seemed almost impossible to dismantle and reconstruct a selection. Fortunately my neighbour Bill Berkson came to the rescue; between us we managed to saw and hammer a possible structure...Meanwhile, Kenneth Koch generously took a long look at our choices and gave us his certainties, doubts and hesitations. Then Jimmy Schuyler added his suggestions...Thus have we all together at last constructed *The Selected Poems*.

This selection admirably compliments Mark Ford's *The New York Poets: an anthology*, also published by Carcanet, which contains work by John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler as well as O'Hara. The term 'New York School of Poets' was first used in 1961 and Schuyler said 'New York poets, except I suppose the colour blind, are affected most by the floods of paint in whose crashing surf we all scramble.' This imagery is especially appropriate to the work of O'Hara.

In January 1949 the *Journal* which Frank O'Hara kept during his time at Harvard expressed deep unease at the mutability of life:

The fragility of things terrifies me! However belligerent the cactus, ash from a casual cigarette withers its bloom; the blackest puddle greys at the first drop of rain; everything fades fades changes dies when it's meddled with; if only things weren't so vulnerable!

He also recognised the importance of art as a way of translating immediate ephemera into something more permanent:

Simply to live does not justify existence, for life is a mere gesture on the surface of the earth, and death a return to that

from which we had never been wholly separated; but oh to leave a trace, no matter how faint, of that brief gesture! For someone, some day, may find it beautiful!

A prominent example of O'Hara's style of making the immediate into the concrete arose from a moment in December 1955 when, in response to being teased by Schuyler about being able to write a poem at any time or in any place, he went into his bedroom to compose, in a matter of minutes, 'Sleeping on the Wing':

The eyes roll asleep as if turned by the wind  
and the lids flutter open slightly like a wing.  
The world is an iceberg, so much is invisible!  
and was and is, and yet the form, it may be sleeping  
too. Those features etched in the ice of someone  
loved who died, you are a sculptor dreaming of space  
and speed, your hand alone could have done this.

The image of the iceberg is teasingly effective since it not only suggests that what we see is a consciousness which rides above so much more but also, since it is itself in the process of change, it highlights the need for 'speed' in order to etch in the ice. The contradictions held in the image are further suggested by the living quality of 'breathe your warmth' which promotes the disappearing of the ice-etching. This preoccupation with death, disappearance and the extinction of singularity is central to the poetry of Frank O'Hara and it accounts, partly, for that poetry's haunting elusiveness.

In August 1956, responding to the deaths of Bunny Lang, whom he had known since Harvard days and Jackson Pollock whose fatal car crash happened some days before, O'Hara wrote the first of what he was later to refer to as his 'I do this I do that' poems. In 'A Step Away from Them' O'Hara left what his biographer, Brad Gooch, calls 'a record for history of the sensations of a sensitive and sophisticated man in the middle of the twentieth century walking through what was considered by some the capital of the globe.'

It's my lunch hour, so I go  
for a walk among the hum-coloured  
cabs. First, down the sidewalk  
where laborers feed their dirty  
glistening torsos sandwiches  
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets  
on. They protect them from falling

bricks, I guess. Then onto the  
avenue where skirts are flipping  
above heels and blow up over  
grates. The sun is hot, but the  
cabs stir up the air. I look  
at bargains in wristwatches. There  
are cats playing in sawdust.

On  
to Times Square, where the sign  
blows smoke over my head, and higher  
the waterfall pours lightly. A  
Negro stands in a doorway with a  
toothpick, languorously agitating.  
A blonde chorus girl clicks: he  
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything  
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of  
a Thursday.

Neon in daylight is a  
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would  
write, as are light bulbs in daylight.  
I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S  
CORNER. Giuletta Masina, wife of  
Frederico Fellini, è bell' attrice.  
And chocolate malted. A lady in  
foxes on such a day puts her poodle  
in a cab.

There are several Puerto  
Ricans on the avenue today, which  
makes it beautiful and warm. First  
Bunny died, then John Latouche,  
then Jackson Pollock. But is the  
earth as full as life was full, of them?  
And one has eaten and one walks,  
past the magazines with nudes  
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and  
the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,  
which they'll soon tear down. I  
used to think they had the Armory  
Show there.

A glass of papaya juice

and back to work. My heart is in my  
pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

Gooch refers to the poem's 'handheld camera fashion' as O'Hara 'heads on his lunch hour west and then downtown from the Museum, past construction sites on Sixth Avenue, through Times Square where he stops for a cheeseburger and a glass of papaya juice beneath the Chesterfield billboard with blowing smoke, and then back uptown to work.' The seizing on moments, the tiny objects, the enticing sights and sounds of the everyday bring to life an intensity of gaze, a celebration of the moment. However, for every exotic sight and delightful sensation, there are falling bricks, bullfights, blow outs, armories, mortuaries, and, as the name Juliet's Corner suggests, tombs. The fragility of the everyday is caught melting between the Puerto Ricans who make the day 'beautiful and warm' and the end-of-line word 'First' which heralds the references to the death of three close friends. As with the image of the iceberg, the poet here seems to be not only a step away from the dead but also from the fast movement of the day: sensations disappear almost as soon as they are presented.

The importance of the fleeting moment is perhaps caught with greatest humour in the much-anthologised 'Why I Am Not a Painter':

I am not a painter. I am a poet.  
Why? I think I would rather be  
a painter, but I am not. Well,  
  
for instance, Mike Goldberg  
is starting a painting. I drop in.  
"Sit down and have a drink" he  
says. I drink; we drink. I look  
up. "You have SARDINES in it."  
"Yes, it needed something there."  
"Oh." I go and the days go by  
and I drop in again. The painting  
is going on, and I go, and the days  
go by. I drop in. the painting is  
finished. "Where's SARDINES?"  
All that's left is just  
letters, "It was too much," Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of  
a colour: orange. I write a line

about orange. Pretty soon it is a whole page of words, not lines. Then another page. There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, of how terrible orange is and life. Days go by. It is even in prose, I am a real poet. My poem is finished and I haven't mentioned orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.

A little like the oil on wood painting, 'Frank O'Hara', which Elaine de Kooning produced in 1956, presence is registered in absence: 'When I painted Frank O'Hara, Frank was standing there. First I painted the whole structure of his face; then I wiped out the face, and when the face was gone, it was more Frank than when the face was there.'

### Ian Brinton

***The Modern Movement, The Oxford English Literary History Volume 10 (1910-1940), by Chris Baldick. (Oxford University Press 2004).***

Chris Baldick's contribution to the thirteen volume English Literary History, edited by Jonathan Bate covers the poetry, drama, fiction, and other literary output in England during the hey-day of Modernism. As with all the volumes there is an emphasis on the literary institutions, forms and historical contexts of the matter under discussion – which is limited to the work written in England during the period, rather than covering all literature in English. There is no attempt at comprehensive coverage, however. As the general editorial preface says: 'Detailed case studies are preferred to summary listings'. This is a dense and lengthy volume and I shall concentrate mostly on the first three chapters, while hoping to suggest overall why the book should be seen as a significant contribution to our understanding of the period as well as a brilliant introduction for undergraduates.

Baldick opens Part 1 of the volume with a chapter looking at the literary market, describing the growth to 80% literacy during the period and the

importance of journalism, the price of novels (about 35p) and the importance of the Net Book Agreement of 1899 and Copyright Act of 1911.

He considers the Leavisite concern with the tri-partite division of readers into 'high', 'middle' and 'low' brow and Arnold Bennett's rebuttal of the idea that the modern age was decadent. Baldick paints a complex picture of a world where Forster could be published by Arnolds because of their huge medical text-book sales, and Duckworth's could promote Lawrence and Richardson because of the enormous market for Elinor Glyn's scandalous sex-novels. He gives a detailed account of the publishing scene which grounds the book in the economics of publishing and casts light on the small press domination of poetry publication. He looks at the world of avant-garde journals such as A. R. Orage's 'New Age' and at the modernist horror at the sensational popular press, quoting the fecally-loaded passage in 'Ulysses' where Bloom reads 'Tit-Bits' sitting on the lavatory. Agents, fees and royalties are all discussed to telling effect.

Chapter Two examines the nature of authorship during the period, looking at the cult of celebrity, the widespread use of pseudonyms, the predominantly middle class backgrounds of most authors and their uncertain economic experiences. Baldick also points out how cosmopolitan the English literary world was – with authors from around the world, especially with Empire connections, working in the London literary scene. This was a culturally hybrid world and its products were varied in style and subject. It was also an age of travel and emigration – Lawrence, Empson and Wodehouse being just a few writers who took long or permanent trips abroad, pursuing new cultures and life-styles away from an often stultifying Britain. Baldick highlights the fact that about a quarter of the major modernist writers were homosexual or bisexual: 'Erotic and artistic exploration went hand in hand'. The war and non-war generations are used to point up some significant political and psychological differences and conflicts, casting some light on the widespread resentment towards the hugely successful Arnold Bennett. Literary coteries from Bloomsbury – so powerful and influential even today – to Pound's various circles are discussed in connection to strict aesthetic beliefs and a tendency to take extreme political positions. Baldick is clearly sympathetic to John Carey's views on highbrow posturings.

The third and final chapter of Part 1 concerns 'Modern English Usage'. Baldick points up the arrival of the crossword puzzle 1924 as a significant moment in the transformation of the 'relationship between the literate public and the vocabulary, orthography, and morphology of the English language'. People went word mad and libraries complained about worn

out dictionaries, especially the OED completed in 1928 after 70 years and one of the great literary achievements of modern times. He has interesting things to say about language, class, sexuality, censorship and propriety, touching on 'Lady Chatterley's Lover', 'Pygmalion' and a number of other classic cases where these complex issues were brought into focus. Concerns about the state of the language were considerable, evident in the work of Robert Bridge's Society for Pure English and in Fowler's influential 'Modern English Usage'. Throughout the book this overall theme of language change is embodied in fascinating short lists of new words at the heading of each chapter – 'blurb', 'high-ranking', 'legalese', 'emote', 'puppeteer', 'gimmick', 'Lawrentian', being a few of them that caught my eye. Word coinage leads to novel literary language and a consideration of Joyce's extraordinary linguistic enterprise or 'messes of mottage'.

Part 11 of the book, substantially the longest of the three, is concerned with 'Forms' and offers a lively and often opinionated survey of poetry, drama, short stories, novels, essays and, very interestingly, 'light reading'. I will deal briefly with just a few of these forms. Baldick is sceptical about the claims of High Modernism to elevated status, to put it mildly, and redresses what he sees as an imbalance in most histories towards its values and hagiographies.

For poetry his opening gambit is that 'the salient tendency of poetic practice in England between 1910 and 1940 is not adequately to be described in terms of 'modernism' at all.' He looks at the traditionalism of the modernists and the modernisms of the traditionalists, in so far as those terms are valid, and at the 'extended range of diction' and unpoetical subject matter to be discerned in the period. Hardy and Yeats are seen as the two Victorians-going-modern, if not modernist, and dominate the early part of the poetry section. Masfield, Brooke, Thomas and the Georgians are given full consideration and their experimental and even controversial practices are seen as vibrant 'realists in the Wordsworthian sense'; there is a particularly good reading of the subtle craft of Thomas's anthologists' favourite, 'Adelstrop'. The Imagists are seen as part of a whole scene, if a 'coterie', and not as the heroic arrivals in a mire of complacency which they have been by some. Yet the readings and analyses of Pound and Eliot are insightful and generous and the account of 'The Waste Land' succinct and intelligent. Sitwell and Lawrence form a link to the Thirties poets: again the compression of information and insight are impressive and one can hear the voice of a sensitive and well-organised teacher in the tone and approach. This book will be invaluable to those wanting a richly balanced survey of the poetry of the period. It is useful to be reminded too that most of the poetry published in the

Thirties was not that of Auden et al but by the likes of Yeats, Blunden, Eliot and de la Mare; Baldick points out that a keen poetry reader would have been familiar, mainly through ubiquitous anthologies, with at least sixty living poets, something a student today is unlikely to achieve.

Drama is seen as one of the most striking examples of culture bifurcating into a minority elite culture and a mass entertainment: the West End being a whole world of popular drama, seen against the more rarefied fringe world of the 'New Drama' at the Everyman in Hampstead and the Lyric in Hammersmith. Of course there was much interaction between the two: Coward's 'The Vortex', for instance, moving from the Everyman to the Royalty, even though it had narrowly escaped censorship by the Lord Chamberlain for its treatment of serial adultery and drug addiction in 1924. The distinctions between West End and fringe, however, were not those of formal differences, but of subject matter. Modernism did not arrive in British drama until the 1950s.

Baldick gives a good discussion of the 'problem plays' of Galsworthy – 'Justice' in 1910 being a spectacular example of reformist success – and others, with Shaw of course getting major coverage. What is impressive again is that Baldick mixes historical and material evidence with stylistic and ideological analysis so that one comes out of the section feeling both informed and with a fresh sense of the interest of things familiar. One omission which would have been of interest – and which would point up the fact that at least one modernist did experiment with form (I'm ignoring Eliot here) – is Wyndham Lewis's 'Enemy of the Stars' (1932) a reworking of the 1914 Vorticist original, complete with philosophical essay, which is quite unlike anything else of the period. Never performed during Lewis's lifetime, and perhaps barely performable (though I've done it!), it nonetheless shows what he was capable of achieving against the grain of the period. Baldick is rather too dismissive of the 'lonely old volcano' for my liking.

The final section, 'Occasions' is of great interest, covering the themes of 'England and the English', 'The Great War', 'Childhood and Youth' and 'Sex and Sexualities'. These allow the author a framework in which to look at a variety of forms playing against deeper structures of history and social and imaginative experience. To take just part of the first section on national identity: He tellingly points up the term 'Blighty', meaning 'home', as deriving from the Hindu 'bilayati', a word meaning 'foreign', bringing home the experience of 'double negation' of many returning colonists and suggesting the increasingly 'unheimlich' character of the heart of a fading empire. Such a perception resonates powerfully today and Orwell's words from 'Homage to Catalonia' about the inhabitants he sees on his return

from Spain still move one: 'sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England', from which only bombs are likely to waken it. H. V. Morton, J. B. Priestley and George Orwell are provided as evidence of a complex political debate about 'the condition of England' while Ford Madox Ford's 'The Good Soldier' is rightly taken as a brilliant exposure of an English 'type' with all its historical inevitability and tragic passion.

This is a fine and authoritative book, both introductory and of interest to the specialist; it provides a host of insights to the literature of the period and will inspire many a student to look into areas they may otherwise never be encouraged to explore.

**Richard Humphreys**

## Short Notes

*Readings in Medieval Texts*, by David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford £19.99)—'a thorough and accessible introduction to the interpretation and criticism of a broad range of Old and Middle English texts from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries.' This delightfully produced volume has twenty-five articles ranging from 'Beowulf, monuments, memory, history' to 'Medieval dream visions: Chaucer's Book of the Duchess'. The chapter on the Gawain-poet suggests that one reason for the enduring delight to be found in Sir Gawain is the poet's 'particular genius' in 'getting readers to experience the adventure without dramatic irony, so that all along we know no more than Gawain.' The chapter on Old English Riddles is excellent with its emphasis upon making 'the familiar strange' and highlighting the unstable border between the serious and the light-hearted which brings to my mind the suggestion by Octavio Paz that humour 'renders ambiguous everything it touches.'

*A Living Language*, by David Constantine (Bloodaxe £7.95)—these three lectures which David Constantine gave at Newcastle upon Tyne form the first in an innovative series where a contemporary poet talks about the craft and practice of poetry to audiences drawn from both the city and the university. 'Translation Is Good for You' is excellent. Constantine recounts the moment in October 1816 when Keats, training

to be a surgeon, spent an evening in Clerkenwell with his friend Cowden Clarke. They were reading together in the 1616 folio of Chapman's works and the following morning Keats wrote his 'On the first looking into Chapman's Homer'. As Constantine puts it:

The sonnet, his most assured to date, is both the mark of an era and an era in itself. The imagery—from astronomy (he alludes to Herschel's discovery of Uranus) and from voyages of discovery (he conflates or confuses Cortes and Balboa)—expresses the particular excitement of a new advance in reading, which itself becomes an image of the new era in his existence as his poetic life gets confidently under way. The agent is a translation, an act of carrying over and passing on. The epics of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, done into the English of Shakespeare's day and age, are brought to life—aloud—two hundred years later by a man with the voice, the bearing, the vocation (as teacher and friend) to do just such a thing for the good of a poet on the threshold of coming fully into his gifts.

As Constantine goes on to point out, it needed the 'recovery of something by then already archaic...for the full novelty of the thing to be brought, with the shock of the foreign, into the present where it could live and work.' It would be interesting to place this thought alongside the 'Lecture on the Philosophy of the Human Mind' by Thomas Brown, published in Scotland in 1820:

When any object of perception is so interesting as to lead us to pause in considering it, the associate feelings which it suggests, are not consecutive merely to the perception; but, as the perception is continued for a length of time, they co-exist, and are mingled with it, so as to form with it one complex feeling.

Brown also refers to the 'burst of overpowering emotion' which can be the result of such perception. Constantine, a poet talking to an audience made up of more than budding versifiers, hails the importance of this sort of shock, the shock of the new:

For every reader some such shock of foreignness is salutary, and poetry has the power to issue it. And for the nation, especially if that nation is English-speaking, the continual shock of the foreign is absolutely indispensable. Too much,

too speedy, a domestication is a form of annexation, one-sided, there is no dialectic in it, no give and take.

***November, Fragments in a Nondescript Style* by Gustave Flaubert (translated by Andrew Brown, Hesperus £6.99)**—the opening of this fine translation of a little-known early work by Flaubert sets the scene:

I love the autumn—that melancholy season that suits memories so well. When the trees have lost their leaves, when the sky at sunset still preserves the russet hue that fills with gold the withered grass, it is sweet to watch the final fading of the fires that until recently burnt within you.

Andrew Brown's introduction juxtaposes Flaubert's tale of adolescent dreaming, the onset of puberty and the narrator's first sexual encounter, with Woody Allen's film *Manhattan*. Starting with Groucho Marx, Allen lists, 'with many 'ums' and 'ahs' the things that make life worth living.' He includes baseball player Willie Mays, the second movement of the 'Jupiter' symphony, 'those incredible apples and pears by Cézanne', the crabs at Sam Wo's. At the end of Woody Allen's self-conscious list there comes 'Uh...Tracy's face'. At this point 'he rises from his couch and runs through the grainy, black-and-white streets of bustling, indifferent New York to see Tracy—but too late, as she is just about to set off to London for six months, no doubt never to return.' Flaubert's narrator is dogged by a 'nagging disquiet'; as an adolescent he yearns for love and dreams of theatrical women who belong in a world of embroidered fantasy:

This is what I dreamt of alone in the evenings, when the wind whistled down the corridors, or during the break, while the others were playing skittles or football, while I wandered along at the foot of the wall, crunching underfoot the leaves that had fallen from the lime trees so I could enjoy the sound of my feet scuffling and kicking through them.

This little Hesperus volume, with the added delight of a Foreword by Nadine Gordimer, brings back into focus an early work by Flaubert (what he called 'a sentimental and amorous mishmash') which was completed before his twenty-first birthday. Although the story was only published posthumously it is the one in which *Madame Bovary* is most clearly foreshadowed and the nameless hero of youthful Romantic yearnings in *November* gives added meaning to the author's own statement, 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi?.'

*Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, edited by Roger Luckhurst, (Oxford World's Classics £8.99)—this selection of stories from the Victorian fin de siècle captures the world of decadence and scandal accompanied by a fine frisson of foul murder, sexual menace and doomed inheritance. It includes 'Sir Edmund Orme', one of Henry James's excursions into the world of the ghost story, with its typical Gothic opening that frames the narrative:

The statement appears to have been written, though the fragment is undated, long after the death of his wife, whom I take to have been one of the persons referred to. There is, however, nothing in the strange story to establish this point, which is, perhaps, not of importance. When I took possession of his effects I found these pages, in a locked drawer, among papers relating to the unfortunate lady's too brief career (she died in childbirth a year after her marriage), letters, memoranda, accounts, faded photographs, cards of invitation.

*The History of King Richard III*, by Sir Thomas More, (Hesperus £6.99)—this finely produced re-issue of the 'history' book which inspired Shakespeare is a delight to read and would be extremely useful to anyone teaching the play *Richard III*. For a taste of Early Renaissance literature try this:

Now fell their mischief thick. And as the evil thing gotten is never well kept, through all the time of his reign never ceased there cruel death and slaughter, till his own destruction ended it.

There is a good glossary of archaic terms at the end and the introduction by Sister Wendy Beckett highlights one of More's areas of interest: 'the lure of power, and the intellectual and moral extremes to which a man will go in search of it.'

**Ian Brinton**

## Addresses of Publishers Cited

**Bloodaxe Books:**

Highgreen, Tarsset, Northumberland NE48 1RP  
([www.bloodaxebooks.com](http://www.bloodaxebooks.com))

**Cambridge University Press:**

The Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU  
([www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org))

**Carcenet Press:**

Alliance House, 30 Cross Street, Manchester M2 7AQ  
([www.carcenet.co.uk](http://www.carcenet.co.uk))

**Edinburgh University Press:**

22 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF  
([www.eup.ed.ac.uk](http://www.eup.ed.ac.uk))

**Hesperus:**

4 Rickett Street, London SW6 1RU  
([www.hesperuspress.com](http://www.hesperuspress.com))

**Oxford University Press:**

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP  
([www.oup.co.uk](http://www.oup.co.uk))

**Palgrave Macmillan:**

Brunel Road, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS  
([www.palgrave.com](http://www.palgrave.com))

**Random House:**

20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA  
([www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk))

**Routledge:**

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN  
([www.routledge.com](http://www.routledge.com))

**Shearsman Books:**

58 Velwell Road, Exeter, EX4 4LD  
([www.shearsman.com](http://www.shearsman.com))

## Notes for information

**Rockdrill:** 5 Vanbrugh Hill, London SE3 7UE  
(rockdrill@opticnerve.fsnet.co.uk)

Seven compact disc recordings of modern poets reading their own poetry are outstanding. Produced by Colin Still (*Optic Nerve*, Birkbeck College, University of London) they include a selection of Lee Harwood, Robert Creeley, Tom Raworth and Jerome Rothenberg. When Mark Ford reviewed Harwood's *Collected Poems* (Shearsman Books) for *The Guardian* in September 2004 he commented on the poetry being 'open, moving and exquisitely delicate in its attention to landscape, mood, and the pressures of time and history.' These qualities are beautifully evident in this recording of Harwood reading 'As Your Eyes Are Blue' or 'Question of Geography'. The death of Robert Creeley in March this year makes the recording of his reading particularly moving. In the current issue of *The Gig* ([www.ndorward.com/poetry/](http://www.ndorward.com/poetry/)) Peter Middleton refers to Creeley's 'extraordinary reflexive poems' which 'speak about language, speech, love, desire, the body, and masculinity' whilst at the same time inviting the reader 'to stand back and reflect on the implications of talking like this in a poem, implications that might include questions about poetry as an art, the value of the aesthetic, the ethics of communication, the state of the modern world, and other large, possibly metaphysical themes.'

## Books Received

*Comedy* by Andrew Stott (Routledge New Critical Idiom)  
*The Author* by Andrew Bennett (Routledge New Critical Idiom)  
*Magic Realism* by Maggie Ann Bowers (Routledge New Critical Idiom)  
*Crime Fiction* by John Scaggs (Routledge New Critical Idiom)  
*Prologues To Shakespeare's Theatre* by Bruster & Weimann (Routledge)  
*John Keats* by John Whale (Palgrave Critical Issues)  
*Creativity, Theory, History, Practice* by Rob Pope (Routledge)  
*Success in GCSE Drama* by Parker & Boardman (Folens)  
*Edges, Assessment for Learning in English* by McNab, Pilgrim & Slee (Heinemann)  
*Writing About Literature* by Judith Woolf (Routledge)

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## About the English Association

The English Association was founded in 1906 and took a leading part in the movement to develop English studies in schools, while encouraging advanced studies in further education. The Association has been publishing *The Use of English* since 1991.

For further information on the Association and its activities visit our website: [www.le.ac.uk/engassoc](http://www.le.ac.uk/engassoc)

Teach English A training course for teachers. Adrian Doff Teacher's Workbook Trainer's Handbook. 978-0-521-34863-8 978-0-521-34864-5. Teachers in Action Tasks for in-service language teacher education and development. Examining Reading Research and practice in assessing second language reading. Studies in Language Testing 29. Hanan Khalifa and Cyril J. Weir. Second Language Classrooms Research on Teaching and Learning. Craig Chaudron Paperback. 978-0-521-33980-3.