

* English Literature in an Afrikaans University

Provocative as my assertions may seem to those who regard the position of our two languages in the schools as a political, instead of an educational, matter, I feel that, after half a century of established mother tongue instruction, the time has come seriously to reconsider our conception of second language teaching.

For one, there is far too much confusion about the aim. The South African situation demands a high degree of proficiency in both languages. This proficiency should be two-fold: first, practical fluency, which will not be discussed in this paper. The remaining objective is reading proficiency. And, confining myself now to the Afrikaner's need of English, it is likely that for the bulk of Afrikaners in all walks of life reading is of more value than the social accomplishment of conversational fluency.

And now we find a lamentable decline of reading as a serious activity in the schools. Gone are the days when school children read Scott, Dickens, "Gulliver's Travels", "The Pilgrim's Progress". The argument that time is lacking in our hectic school milieu is a delusion, if one thinks of vacations aimlessly loitered away, or of corns developed in lining up at cinema entrances. Similarly misleading is the excuse that the Afrikaner child has sufficient reading matter in his own language. His misdirected craving for reading is eloquently testified to by the queues of juveniles frequenting the bookstalls in quest of comic horrors.

If we are concerned about the corruption of these prospective citizens by the avalanche of semi-pornographic sensational literature and cinema entertainment to which they are subjected, we should realise that the remedy lies in attractive school libraries, equipped with sound juvenile literature in English and Afrikaans, with teachers competent to encourage reading. The child's imaginative world, formerly inhabited by the romantic heroes and sweet ladies of the older type of morally sound fiction, is today occupied by Tarzan's escapades with ill-clad damsels.

The students transfer the same reading habits to the university. It is now beneath their dignity as sophisticated intellectuals to line up at bookstalls in search of sensational stimulants, but they find a convenient substitute in the cinema, in order to satisfy their craving for pornography and low-level sensation — a craving so insistent that no academic interests could induce them to give the bioscope proprietor cause to lament their vacant chairs.

As this paper deals with what should be the intellectual interests of an academic elite, no further reference will be made to these popular reading levels. For the university student, reading should, ideally, be of two kinds.

- a) Technical literature for reference and research in all fields of advanced study.

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In this respect Afrikaans is as yet largely deficient, so that the students, in order to satisfy their scholarly needs, have to depend on other modern languages.

b) The other kind of reading matter is imaginative literature, not, now, that intended for popular amusement, but serious literature beyond the popular level. Here we of an older generation are apt to forget that the decline of reading is depriving our youth of an inestimable cultural asset: namely, the ability to read the best available in European languages.

The term "culture" has many meanings, so that I had better define the sense in which I am using it. In its widest sense, it could mean man's efforts to carry out the Divine injunction to replenish the earth. The term is, also, used in a narrower sense to signify a civilised way of life. Then, again, it is used in the sense of a closed culture, that which characterises a people's national identity. In this last sense, the Afrikaner people has certainly maintained a distinctive culture.

I am, however, using the term in the sense of relating reality to values: that is, the contemplation and interpretation of the meaning of life and human experience, an awareness of higher spiritual values, and the manifestation of this contemplation and interpretation, either in expository form as in history and philosophy, or in artistic production, such as painting, music, imaginative literature. (I am excluding religion as such from this consideration, because we are dealing with human effort and not Divine inspiration, although no culture in the sense of the historical and artistic contemplation of human values can avoid being profoundly influenced by the religious concepts of the people concerned).

Cultural achievements naturally have their roots embedded in the national soil. Shakespeare was a product of Renaissance Britain, Rembrandt a Dutch painter, and our budding Afrikaans literature is essentially national. But great art transcends national barriers and becomes universally human in its appeal. The typically national aspect is especially of little importance with communities so closely associated as the Western European peoples, and so similarly moulded by the same traditions and influences: the virgin soil of the indigenous European peoples, fertilised by the Renaissance, continually stimulated by mutual cultural contacts, and profoundly enriched and elevated by the most potent unifying feature of Western culture, the pervading influence of Christian thought and teaching.

This common cultural heritage, transcending national boundaries, produced the European mind, a concept difficult to define, but best understood by contrasting it with the Oriental mind, or the Bantu mind, or even the Slavonic mind. The unity of the Western peoples, their collective "mind", lies, not so much in a similar social structure or in political alliances, as in common concepts about human values. So that Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven are more than representatives of a national outlook: they are the finest embodiments of the experience and contemplation of the European mind of their time.

A colonial people naturally adapts itself to a way of life demanded by new interests, and aspires to political independence, but if it severs its cultural bonds with Europe, it does so at the risk of deterioration. The early settlers in South Africa,

isolated and without educational facilities, had little means of maintaining cultural contacts with Europe. The result was a lapse in those achievements which, as Matthew Arnold said, are the products of the best that has been thought and said in the world. Fortunately, the potential foundation of the Colonists was not destroyed, because the period of isolation was not prolonged enough, because they retained their consciousness of European descent, and because they clung to the Christian faith.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, several factors have brought about what we might call the Renaissance of the Afrikaner people. Of these, I mention two; a) the consciousness of nationhood; b) the rise of South African education, with its most important outcome the development of an Afrikaans literature. This literature, distinctively national in its earliest efforts, has the freshness and vigour of adolescence, but if it aspires to mature achievements, it has to rise above that which appeals merely because of its local flavour, which it can only do by being continually stimulated by the best of Europe.

“A great writer”, says Eliot, “needs a historical sense . . ., a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe, and within it the literature of his own country, composes a simultaneous order. The mind of Europe changes, and this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, and which does not superannuate either Shakespeare or Homer”.

English literature, by virtue of its quality and variety, offers the most complete historical record of European culture, and it contains, moreover, in addition to its own achievement, translations of the best in other European languages, from Homer down to Soviet Russia.

Apart from the Celtic contribution, which has from time enriched English cultural thought, Old English literature, in its written form from about 400 A.D. onwards, reflects the modes of thought of the old Teutonic peoples — a pagan world-view, but with its own code of chivalry and a pleasing naïveté. Christianity brought new concepts, and the two world-views, the Christian and the ancient Teutonic, converged, until they merged in what we might call the Mediaeval mind.

The Middle English period, in addition to producing a rich and flexible language by the fusion of Old English and Norman French, was, as in other European countries, a melting-pot stage of systems and influences: feudalism, Roman Catholicism, the Reformation; an imagination which revelled in folklore and superstition, and yet capable of the noblest religious reverence and sacrifice; servile subjection to a corrupt Church or to baronial or sovereign rulers, and yet the dawn of democratic government — all stimulated to fruition by the Renaissance, which, by reviving the Classical literatures, brought a great incentive to scholarly achievement.

From this melting-pot emerged the mind of modern Europe. This European mind has, since then, made great scientific progress, but in that kind of mental activity which leads to a fuller interpretation of human life, we have not advanced beyond the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We still have to go back to earlier centuries for our great writers, painters, composers.

The creative impulse in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was an active

and robust imagination, which manifested itself in its geographical world-picture in exploration beyond the seas, and in the field of spiritual experience in literature which was actuated by the highest concepts of human values. At the apex of this literature stands Shakespeare, the supreme literary expression of the mind of modern Europe, his greatness lying, not only in his poetic excellence, but in his human wisdom and in his interpretation of human experience.

In view of the high moral tone, which has been a very pronounced feature of English literature, I mention a few landmarks in the 17th century: the Authorised translation of the Bible, the greatest prose book in the language; Milton, the spokesman of Protestantism, as Dante had been that of Roman Catholicism; Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress", after the Bible the most often translated book in the world.

The 18th century saw a lull in the exuberant activity of the post-Renaissance mind. Men accepted the established order, with its ease and high living, merely commenting on it in the form of social satire.

But soon that imagination was again stirred into some of its wildest flights in the Romantic movement, a *Zeitgeist* which stimulated that spontaneous enthusiasm which produced Romanticism in literature.

The Victorian age brought the spread of prose fiction to meet the demands of a wider reading public, and in spite of its conventional moral complacency, some writers were already anticipating present-day problems, soon to be caused by industrialisation and the conflict between dogmatic religious concepts and an evolutionistic biological science.

The artistic style of an age, in painting, music, literature, is not so much its choice, as its curse. Never has this been more true than of present-day English literature. Romantic embellishment has been replaced by new techniques, by which modern writers endeavour to express themselves in as naked and even cruel a way as possible.

Never has artistic production been actuated by such a disturbing sense of the problems of the time: the collapse of the old order; the nervous strain of overpopulated Europe, "a world", as Eliot says, "dark and confused and disturbed by portents of fear", needing, as Shakespeare says, "more the Divine than the physician".

No political oratory, no pulpit eloquence could bring home to one the perplexity of the present-day European mind more poignantly than the frightening manifestation thereof in English literature, pathetic in its ironic comment on life.

Such is the historical record which English literature presents. Now, a few observations about the reading difficulties of students who have to orientate their minds to it. Large as these obstacles loom at the outset, it has been the gratifying experience of English departments in Afrikaans universities that, if approached with faith in the intellectual and imaginative capacity of willing students, the walls of Jericho tumble quickly.

There is, first, the general tendency among all students to shirk sustained effort, by the simple expedient of having their reading done for them by proxy, the fruits of which they obtain in summarised second-hand form in lecturers' notes — a

pernicious weakness of the flesh against which students should in their own interest be protected by examining methods which rigorously demand first-hand knowledge.

Then, the factor of immaturity, a serious disqualification in reading literature which demands experiential maturity. Freshmen in South African universities have hardly outgrown the teenage mentality, which they seem to shed only from the second year onwards.

Thirdly, the stock or conventional attitudes, which have to be eradicated in order to appreciate the values embodied in higher literature. Conventional attitudes are caused by many factors in our complex world: the unmanageable numbers, in which the individual loses his individuality and becomes a statistical number in a regimented society; mass propaganda, which herds all people, including school children, into a uniform mob, thereby creating the crowd mentality, which derives cathartic satisfaction from collective sensationalism, whether it takes the form of frenzied response to political eloquence, or that of mass entertainment by means of popular literature or the cinema. This is the tragedy of the present-day European mind: the crowd mentality has replaced the individualism which was so marked a feature of post-Renaissance Europe. The conventional mind relies on the newspaper to think for it, mass propaganda to suspend its judgment, Hollywood to determine its taste.

This habit of having their thinking done for them the students bring to the academic atmosphere of the university, where some of them never seem to kick themselves free of the traces, harnessing them to the team, whereas others soon respond to the sterner stuff of humane studies by acquiring mental habits which refuse to plod the treadmill path of conventional thought.

Lack of historical perspective is another formidable obstacle. In Europe, where many things symbolise the past in observable form, there has not been that sharp break which is inevitable in a pioneer community. In the turbulent existence of a young people, fostering national sentiment in order to maintain itself, recent history assumes prominence. Hence the South African youth finds it difficult to transport the imagination to remote times not immediately connected with the local historical set-up.

This deficiency could be partly minimised by means of integrated courses, instead of our present system of subjects pigeonholed into separate departments, with little correlation. An integrated course places the primary interest of the student as central, with supplementary reading in related fields, like a river with tributaries from ancillary catchment areas to feed the main current. English studies, for instance, would suggest side-avenues into the fields of moral philosophy, social history, and the like.

A further barrier in reading a foreign literature is ethnocentrism, or national self-centredness, an inability to extend one's world of thought beyond the conventional attitudes of one's own tribe. As conscious antipathy this manifests itself only occasionally, students readily realising that they must not confuse a people's literature with its politics. But as subconscious attitudes, ethnocentrism is common to everybody nurtured in the lore of his people.

Pronounced as this national bias is with freshmen, it vanishes surprisingly quickly as the students realise that the new literature is opening a new world of experience to them -- as Keats said about his introduction to Greek literature, they "feel like a watcher of the skies, when a new planet sweeps onto his ken", or as explorers, when they first "gazed on the Pacific". This progress is facilitated by the fact that in English our students have the literature of a related Western people in a cognate language. As their experiential horizon broadens, they acquire that imaginative tolerance which enables them, like the good Samaritan, to extend their sympathy to the human situation of another tribe.

It is usually assumed that local colour — that is, familiar environmental background — is an important factor in appreciation. I feel, however, that it has little effect. In literature, as in painting, the emotional effect of description lies, not in the scene itself, but in the human emotion projected into the animal or material world. And in this, imagery that portrays the foreign scene is as effective as the local.

Lastly, the language difficulty, the most crucial problem in all second language teaching.

Meaning in language consists of two elements: a denotational, and a connotational element. Denotation is the plain, factual meaning, devoid of emotional effect. Connotation is the subtle emotional implication of what is said. Denotation is essential in scientific discourse, but connotation gives language its evocative power in social life, in religion, in imaginative literature.

Meaning in language consists of two elements: a denotational, and a connotational and in learning a new language, the question is: can the new language, with growing proficiency, acquire, to a degree, a similar function in the emotional and imaginative experience of the learner?

The South African situation presents a curious paradox. The prevailing conception of second language teaching, inherited from an earlier situation, in which it was necessary to justify mother tongue instruction, is based on an oversimplification of the complex social phenomenon of bilingualism: that is, the assumption that it is the perpetual monopoly, instead of the initial prerogative, of the mother tongue to serve as a vehicle for emotional experience, thereby relegating the second language to the position of a mere lifeless makeshift unconnected with the affective activity of the mind.

While, accordingly, the school system avoids using the second language in meaningful contexts, such as social intercourse, moral and aesthetic instruction, its policy is contradicted by the social phenomenon, observable everywhere, that many South Africans converse, read, and make parliamentary speeches, with full emotional satisfaction, in the other language. The evidence of our bilingual social set-up is that the mind can deftly manipulate two or more languages in its mental processes. Those who wishfully envisage the "death" of either language should realise that language consciousness cannot be dictated to, but is determined by the practical situation, which largely ignores the artificial distinction which the school system is seeking to perpetuate.

I have no quarrel with mother tongue instruction, as so natural and obvious that it needs no argument. But I do feel that the schools, without jeopardising their distinctive cultural character or retarding youthful minds, could provide more opportunities for using the second language in meaningful contexts.

First-year students show marked differences in their response to the connotational significance of English. With some, it has not advanced beyond a lifeless function, whereas others are not unduly hampered by the second language stigma. What they all do need is much help in appreciating the significant organisation of language which great literature contains. Those who find the process congenial become progressively tuned in to the cadences and associations which the poetic use of language exploits.

This, then, is the task which a department of English studies sets itself: to equip those who takes its courses with something which will not only enrich their own lives, but will enable them as teachers to pass on the great tradition by introducing their pupils to a major European literature.

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