New English, New Imperatives

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Toward a Response-Oriented Curriculum in Literature

In late summer of 1966, some fifty English educators and twenty-five assorted consultants gathered on the beautiful and isolated campus of Dartmouth College to spend a month of "reasoning together" concerning the future of English teaching. What was unusual about the conference was not only its support by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the NCTE, MLA, and NATE of the United Kingdom, but that the composition of the conference included leading American and British literary critics, creative writers, linguists of various disposition, and specialists in English teaching at virtually all grade levels. Those present ranged from a world famous phonetician from the University of Edinburgh, the head of the department of psychology at the University of

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London, the leading British specialist on George Eliot, the author of one of the most significant critical works of the past decade, the American director of a significant study on university reform, to primary supervisors and classroom teachers from both suburb and slum. To be sure, college and university professors of English predominated, as they have been wont to dominate in recent curricular reform in America, a fact that is especially important to recall in considering the results of the conference. All in all, however, the total group was probably as distinguished as any which has been convened to consider the basic problems.

Even more significant were the processes of deliberation. For four weeks—of reasoning together, living together, arguing together, working in seminar and study group, debating, discussing, reading, reporting—the participants tended to the task at hand. Much has been written of the "conflict in cultures" that emerged at Dartmouth, much more about the recommendations themselves. Two books and six pamphlet publications represent the official products; article after article continues to express minority opinion. Yet out of bruised feelings and brusk attitudes, out of the cauldron of smashed curricular patterns, a very real consensus emerged.

For me, the Dartmouth Seminar was less an end than a beginning—a beginning of a reassessment of my own views on the teaching of English, an awareness of the inevitable consequences of some of my earlier ideas, a sense that somehow, in some ways, American English education had gone astray. I was fortunate to follow the Dartmouth experience with a detailed on-the-site study of English teaching in England, where with the guidance of leading teaching specialists in the United Kingdom and the support of fellow faculty members from the University of Illinois, I was able to compare the teaching of English in pacemaking high schools of England, Scotland, and Wales with teaching I had earlier studied in the United States. Our findings are reported in a publication which has been released by the National Council of Teachers of English,[1] and I do not propose to review them here. But in commenting on the teaching of literature in our schools, three insights emerging from the Dartmouth experience and my later studies in England may help to establish a point of view:

1. Social and emotional learning are as basic to English education as are intellectual goals. After a decade of emphasis on hard core intellectual and rational processes in our efforts at curriculum reform, we must look again at emotional and social processes. It is not enough for young people to read and study Shakespeare. What is more important is how they feel about Shakespeare after the reading has been completed.

2. Sequence and continuity in instruction in English will be found in students' developing processes involving the uses of language and the responses to literature, not in inert bodies of literature, language, and rhetoric parcelled out from grade to grade. "The best preparation for the next grade level," said Wayne Booth at Dartmouth, "is the best possible experience at the present grade level." The conventional questions of curricular reform—What is the literary heritage that children must have? At what level do we introduce American literature? What elements of criticism do we cover in grade 9?—are important questions only if English is seen as the coverage of established content. The Dartmouth conferees asked rather, How can a student grow in effectiveness in his use of oral and written language?

3. The imaginative education of boys and girls must be the major concern of teachers of literature. It is not enough to implant facts and knowledge about literature and literary study, to teach skill in reading, to provide time to read without concern for what is happening to individuals during the process of reading. Concern with the creative, imaginative response of the learner to life, to literature, leads inevitably to the questioning of many conventional programs in schools today. Are we spending too much time on book and author and tradition, too little on the pupil's own response? What we need is not a history-centered curriculum in literature, a structure-centered curriculum, or a genre-centered curriculum. What is needed is a response-centered curriculum.

With these views in mind then, with the background of experience which came from Dartmouth and England and from subsequent reading, I suggest four dimensions of literary response as particularly important to consider as schools move toward establishing response-centered literary programs in English.

1. *The ultimate purpose of literary education in the secondary schools is to deepen and extend the responses of young people to literature of many kinds.* There are other purposes, of course: to reinforce values and points of view (as in introducing black literature into the curriculum), to transmit important cultural information, to help young people to learn to apply critical terms or to understand certain critical theories. But these are adjunctive or secondary purposes. What is important is that we perceive literature as human experience—both the experience of the writer and the experience of the reader—and know that when it really works, it can have all of the power and impact of life experience itself. The full study of literature involves concern with the work itself, concern with the writer of the work, and concern with the relationship between the reader and the work. The former are the province of the critic and the literary historian; the latter, of the teacher of literature. This is why response to literature rather than literature itself must be our major concern.

2. *Response to literature is not passive but active.* It is largely internalized and it can involve the full play of the human personality—the rational powers, the emotional reactions, the ethical commitments. Alan Purves has completed the most comprehensive modern analysis of the responses of many kinds of readers—critics and scholars as well as school children. Although Purves' report of the full range of reactions is exceedingly complex, he finds most kinds of responses may be classified in four broad areas:

> *Engagement.* The internalized emotional response to a literary work which involves personal commitment and is present even in the reactions of our most mature readers.
>
> *Perception.* Those responses having to do with the acquisition of meaning, of basic understanding of what a work means or perhaps how it means.
>
> *Interpretation.* Those generalized responses through which a reader relates a work to a human experience or to other kinds of literary experience.
>
> *Evaluation.* Those responses in which a reader judges the worth of a literary work in relation either to personal or external criteria.[2]

These dimensions, variously expressed, suggest the full range of response to literature. Yet school programs, if they are assessed from available courses of study, from the end-questions in literary anthologies, or from reports of classroom observers, seem to limit rather than extend the dimensions of response. Too few teachers, and even fewer students, recognize the importance of dealing directly with the dimension of engagement. Almost no attention seems to be directed to the problem of evaluation, and precious little to interpretation in the large sense in which Purves uses the term. Rather, in emphasizing factual knowledge, literal comprehension, or even intrinsic critical analysis, teachers tend to confine our programs and our students to the dimension of perception when they deal with literary response at all. The teaching of skill in reading and of methods of critical analysis are important in and for themselves. Readers must learn how to unlock basic meaning at various levels. But such instruction is only tangential to actual experience in literature itself. Research has amply demonstrated that some of our most able readers, at least those with high scores on standardized reading tests, can be among our most disabled responders. A good many individuals may understand every word in *Hedda Gabler* and still not sense both rationally and emotionally the brooding malevolence of Ibsen's drama, and the way in which the overt symbolism foreshadows Hedda's relentless march to catastrophe. Without some kind of basic affective reaction to the underlying tension in such a literary work, the reader remains unmoved, detached, and largely incapable of any real literary response at all.

3. *Response to literature is highly personal and is dependent to a considerable degree upon the background of experiences in literature and in life that a reader brings to any literary work.* Still, certain kinds of experience seem sufficiently common to the young people in our culture that they are important to consider in choosing and teaching literature in our schools.

Age and maturity, for example, seem to affect the responses of the individual far more than intelligence or reading ability. The accelerated reader and the retarded reader will often like sports stories, juvenile romances, or animal stories at approximately the same time, albeit the advanced fourteen year old may find his

satisfaction in George Plimpton's *Paper Lion* while his classmate responds to far more simplistic writing. Similarly, certain works of literature require a maturity that no adolescent can be expected to have. A few advanced readers may understand every word of Synge's *Riders to the Sea,* but few if any will have lived life sufficiently to respond emotionally, not intellectually, to the endless, inevitable waiting for death that controls the contextual cadences against which this small tragedy is enacted.

Sex differences influence response to literature, particularly during early adolescence, as most teachers inevitably discover. Both "boy books" and "girl books" are needed in any classroom.

Social and cultural differences have a unique and uncertain impact on response, albeit I am not certain they do not work largely in highly individualistic ways. It is true that young people in our urban centers today are seeking a relevance in literary content that we have not always provided, but it is far from clear that, aside from reenforcement of attitude and perhaps initial motivation, that literature written by black writers, for example, about the black experience in America has greater impact on the black reader than on the white. What young readers are seeking, I think, is not the superficial relevance of color but the underlying relevance of the human experience. In the long run it may not be the blackness or whiteness of a protagonist or a writer that is essential but his thought and feeling and response to life.

One aspect of our comparative study of American and British schools reenforces and illuminates this point. In an attempt to identify some of the most compelling literary experiences of adolescents in the United Kingdom and in the United States, we questioned many near-graduates on their most significant literary experiences. The titles most frequently mentioned on both sides of the Atlantic were generally similar; *1984* and *Catch 22,* for example, seem to provide important experiences regardless of where an adolescent lives. But there were differences as well. American students, both black and white, caught in the turmoil of the racial revolution, reported interest in titles like *Black Like Me, Cry, the Beloved Country,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird.* British adolescents could not have been less interested. Instead, they substituted a similar kind of book dealing with the working class struggle—*Sons and Lovers* and

Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner. Here surely we see important cultural differences at work. Some books apparently speak primarily to the social and cultural issues; others reflect something more basic in the human condition. But still we must remember that the overall lists were more similar than different and that the one title preferred above all others on both sides of the Atlantic was William Golding's tumultuous tale of adolescence, *Lord of the Flies.*

Above all, teachers need to remember that response to literature is highly personal and that elements of content in a selection can block or facilitate individual reactions. Henry Meckel's analysis of the reactions of some adolescent boys to Hugh Walpole's *Fortitude,* the story of a son's struggle against father and family, showed that such books can awaken such painful personal associations in some readers as to prevent them from entering the literary experience.

Experiences in using books in the classroom and the results of the reading preference studies may help teachers identify selections appropriate for large numbers of young people at a particular age, but we need to provide also for the uniquely personal choices and reactions, perhaps through programs of guided individual reading.

4. *Response to literature can be affected by methods of approach utilized by the teacher within the classroom.* Conferees at Dartmouth were much concerned with teacher approaches. For example, a recent experimental comparison of the responses to literature of adolescent boys in Belgium suggests they are circumscribed almost entirely by the methods of *explication du texte,* largely because their schooling has concentrated on refining such limited expression of response. Yet it is the opening of a multiplicity of appropriate responses rather than restrictiveness which should be our major goal.

Important in the classroom of course is the position of the teacher and his relations with individual readers. Exploration of literature, discovery of ideas and experiences in texts, open-ended discussions (whether structured or informal) seem crucial. Close reading that leads young people to develop awareness of what is said and how it is said contributes importantly to anyone's literary education and is virtually essential if educational programs are to concentrate on literature and the literary experience. But close

reading is not and must not be the only methodological staple of the program in literature, and it must be closely related to wide reading.

Expressions of response by the pupils themselves can occur in many forms. Talking about individual works, in both formal and informal ways, affords readers an opportunity to organize and share their cumulative reactions. Other kinds of oral expressions of response need greater attention: recreating the literary experience through interpretive reading, whether by teacher or pupil reader, provides for some interplay of emotion with reason; dramatizing scenes in informal classroom setting, especially important in developing a sense of the uniqueness of drama as genre. Imaginative writing as creative response deserves greater attention in our classrooms. Dialogue, monologue, narrative, poetry, journals, diaries—any one can engage the reader in the process of imaginative response to human experience. Creation or recreation of literary experience or response through mime, role playing, and improvised classroom drama is common throughout the United Kingdom. During my visits there I saw adolescents completely engaged in dramatizing such events as the experiences of medieval pilgrims and players en route to Canterbury, the impact of the Aberfan Welsh coal mining disaster, the story of the Prodigal Son, the assassination of a president, and, at Easter, the Trial, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. The individual approaches that can facilitate engagement with literature are many, but fundamentally they have one attribute in common: they avoid the routine, the mechanical, the overly technical dwelling on knowledge as fact, on critical method as end, on critical theory as ultimate, and they stress instead the active and vital engagement of each individual in reaching to a literary work or a literary experience.

To achieve such purpose, a program in literature almost certainly must have three dimensions: that which relates the individual reader with the individual book; that which provides for small group experiences in literature; and that which provides shared common experiences for the class as a whole. Clearly it is through the guided individual reading which we attempt to find the "right book at the right time" for each of our readers; and clearly, too, such a program must provide time for careful guidance by the

teacher, conferences with individual students on the books they are reading, and conversations during which pupils have opportunity to share with others some of the experiences that they are having in literature. The notion that individual reading can be "outside" reading or "collateral" reading, i.e., something adjunctive to or less important than the major strand of literary programs, implies a clear lack of recognition of what a broad program of individual reading can contribute to literary education. Schools are doing much these days to talk about independent study by pupils; yet how much of this independent study has been employed for wide reading in literature? In our comparisons of British and American youth, we found both groups spending about the same amount of time in reading outside of school hours, yet two-thirds of the time of American youngsters was devoted to assigned reading of school assignments. Only one-third of the reading time of British youth was so restricted. Perhaps one of the reasons why we have failed to educate a nation of book readers is that we are so reluctant to give them the opportunity to develop personal reading habits on their own.

Small group experiences with literature are important as well, particularly if we are to provide opportunity for young people to read and react together to books of many kinds. Small seminar-type discussions of particular titles, perhaps led by students rather than the teacher, have been employed with advantage in some experimental schools. Listening to recorded literature, viewing films as literature, reading poetry aloud in informal small group settings—such communal experiences can generate responses of many kinds.

Teacher presentation of a selection accompanied by class discussion or response remains our most widespread approach, and perhaps always will, although much can be done to ensure that the students as well as the teachers have an opportunity to respond. We need to remember, for example, that we must promote engagement as well as understanding and modify our approaches accordingly. More oral reading by the teacher will help in some classes, and emphasis on the oral is crucial in teaching poetry and drama. Opportunity for young people to formulate their reactions prior to discussion needs greater emphasis too—perhaps a few moments of free talk or free writing after reading is completed or a chance

to respond graphically through color and linear symbolism for those less verbally inclined. Such expressions of response, if they precede any organized discussion or questioning, will help some young readers identify their own feelings and ideas. Dramatization can also help. Some time ago, partially as a result of the Springfield Institute, a group of young eighth graders dramatically enacted in class the experience of two hijacked flights to Cuba, with each student assuming the role of a passenger attempting to dissuade the hijacker. The activity, an epilogue to the reading of an essay, was prologue to writing which in itself led to another literary experience. Listening to a recording of a similar or contrasting selection, reading two pieces for comparative purposes, beginning and building on the students' most vivid immediate reactions—these can help project many into active reaction to the piece. The approaches are limited only by the imagination of the teacher and the more clearly in the beginning they can approach the actual reactions of student readers, the greater the impact they are likely to have.

The conferees at Dartmouth said it well:

> Response is a word that reminds the teacher that the experience of art is a thing of our own making, an activity in which we are our own interpretive artist. The dryness of schematic analysis of imagery, symbols, myths, structural relations, *et al.*, should be avoided passionately at school and often at college. It is literature, not literary criticism, which is the subject. At the present time, there is too much learning about literature in place of discriminating enjoyment, and many students arrive at and leave universities with an unprofitable distrust of their personal experiences to literature. At the university, as in the secondary school, the explicit analysis of literature should be limited to the *least* required to get an understanding of the work, within the student's limits, and the aim should be to return as soon as possible to a direct response to the text.

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[1] *Teaching English in the United Kingdom,* A Comparative Study. James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969.

[2] Alan C. Purves with Victoria Rippere. *Elements of Writing about a Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature.* Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968.