

Editorial

ONE of the problems confronting teachers of literature is that of remembering what they knew when they were students. There is a very natural desire to say to someone who is beginning to read the Elizabethan poets or dramatists 'Have you never read Ovid?'. Or, 'What about Petrarch?'. Or, 'Do Castiglione and Machiavelli mean nothing to you?'. Did they mean much to the teachers when they began to fathom the subtleties of a sonnet sequence, or to assess the effect of Mediterranean mythology upon the Anglo-Saxon mind, or to appreciate Elizabethan realism in statecraft and attempts at elegance in the social life of the court? There is a natural desire to compare, to set the writer against his intellectual background, to give a wide view, an historical background, a socio-political-economic setting, to the literature under consideration. And therein lies the danger, that the text itself, formerly swamped under excessive exegesis, may now be pushed aside in favour of a superficial sweep around the purlieus.

This pardonable desire to liven up literary studies has about it a touch of Pound's cry of 'Make it new'. It sometimes arises from a very human desire on the part of the teacher, whether in school, college or university, to avoid covering the same old ground, to avoid repeating this year what was said last year, and the year before. And yet this is perhaps the real test of a good teacher: can he continue to convey enthusiasms about literature, about the same literature? For we cannot afford to dismiss our classics. Nor can we fail to convey enthusiasm.

The teacher has now a more testing role than before because his audience, from very tender years, has been accustomed to the provision of entertainment by professionals — by politicians, preachers, pundits, actors — on radio and, more effectively, on television. A very cold eye can be cast upon the teacher's performance. New standards of comparison exist, and much can be found lacking. Lacking, that is, in entertainment value.

How far should learning entertain? This is a central question for many a teacher. Is the teacher merely to aim at arousing and holding the pupils' interests at all costs? Education must not, presumably, entertain at the cost of failing to instruct and to stimulate disciplined enquiry. And whether or not an anti-authoritarian age likes instruction (and it often shows that it does not), instruction is necessary. To fail to provide it is as unfair to the taught as is the abnegation of moral responsibility by parents who fail to give any sense of standards to their children (often out of a misguided desire to avoid antagonism at all costs). Should the child leave school lacking in an ability to write accurate prose? Should the child lack an adequate vocabulary? Does the pupil not demonstrate thereby an inability to think, to express ideas as efficiently, as persuasively — indeed let us say as elegantly — as possible?

Teaching grammar, syntax and style, however, may be dull stuff compared to the heady delights of plunging off the beaten track into political philosophy, through the hedges of history or the copses of comparative literature. Keeping to the path is tedious but too much dillying and dallying — however sporting Amaryllis, however welcoming the shade — means that the pupil does not get a reasonable view of the whole terrain of literature.

Child and, later, student do suffer if those unfashionable three r's are neglected: if the foundations are unsound modern architecture will tumble just as readily as old. The old ways of teaching English were perhaps too inflexible, too restrictive, indeed sometimes too unimaginative. The new curving cantilevers of 'creative interpretation' can be as miscalculated, as badly constructed, and hence as dangerous as any collapsible modern bridge or matchbox of flats. Ultimately, however, education depends upon the individual and whether he or she *wants* to read or write — no syllabus will hinder that desire.

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