

Such a worldview damages both the place and the academic integrity of religious education. Teachers of physics, history, or German would be suitably worried if the academic integrity of their disciplines were called into question. It is precisely when attempting to speak to all of the experience of life that religious education runs the risk of becoming weak and losing its focus. These essays go a very long way in drawing the attention of religious educators to the epistemological and pedagogic questions that must be asked. Canadian educators of all religious traditions would profit from reading this work, for they too must contribute to the crucial and perennial task of attempting to unite a religiously diverse student body for their role as citizens. It is a task that should include commitment to one's religious tradition. I believe that the teaching of religious education in non-denominational schools should be an area of discussion in Canada, and this book could assist Canadian educators in focusing upon some of the questions and issues that could enliven such a discussion.

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After Literacy: Essays,
by John Willinsky, 2001. New York:
Peter Lang Publishing, softcover, 296 pages.

This collection of essays, written by someone I consider to be one of the leading lights in literacy education in Canada, represents an examination of the role of critical literacy in today's postmodern world of texts, hypertexts, and the information age. What is impressive here is the scope of Professor Willinsky's reach for he is, indeed, someone who reads widely and deeply. In fact, the title of his book, *After Literacy* seems to suggest that there is a point after learning to read and write where literacy seems redundant and out of fashion. However, a careful reading of his introduction suggest otherwise. If I understand him correctly, his view of literacy does not address the issues of learning to read – the great debate – as much as what must happen after one

becomes literate, for to remain literate in its most functional terms, means that the focus has been on "enhancing their capacity for letter-recognition, word decoding, and sentence comprehension" (p. 4). From Willinsky's point of view, what each of the essays attempts to accomplish is to bind educational concerns with the primary:

History of literate practices and with the ends to which this education in language might well be directed, as those goals are suggested by, for example, the reading of the Haggadah at the Passover seder or the spelling of a name on the barrel of a pen. (p. 5)

What the essays attempt to do, then, is to come to a fuller understanding of what reading and writing can mean for people (p. 5).

Given this brief overview, I can only comment meaningfully on a few of the essays. The chapter on "Postmodernism" is, in my view, a chapter which treats somewhat lightly the whole field of discourse in an area that is replete with individuals who require a much deeper treatment of their ideas that one could adequately cover in a single chapter. However, if it is only a primer, it may not have been the author's attempt to be exhaustive; rather, the endeavour may merely have been to introduce the notion as a backdrop to the use of the term as it is seen within a practical context.

In effect, the chapters which captured my attention were chapters four, eight, and nine. In chapter four, Professor Willinsky challenges Olson's distinction of oral and literate cultures. If I understand Olson, the claim he makes is that there is a marked difference between text as utterance and text as an autonomous representation of meaning. The argument then follows: in entering formal schooling, children must move away from the oral tradition in order to read text, which is an abstraction. And it is at this juncture that many children go astray for they can no longer view the text as an oral representation of meaning. Text, namely written text, takes on a new life and children must learn to come to grips with text that, in many cases, is at one remove from their own personal experiences. What seems to be overlooked here, though, is the role that oral language plays in elucidating the message that the written text has to offer. Oftentimes, children must approach a text from their oral tradition. They must begin to see the text as it arises out of their oral tradition. So much of beginning literacy, I would suggest, comes from a rich background of oral language (e.g., folk tales, rhymes, playground jingo, conversations from home, television, and so on). In all of this, it seems that this may not be a divide as much as a

pathway along which the language user makes his way. Language (oral language) is like a garment that is grown old with use and is shaped according to its user's experiences with the whole of one's being. Perhaps, then, there is no divide only divisions in interpretation.

Chapters eight and nine held the greatest interest for me for this is where I felt that Willinsky's strongest work is displayed. The work on dictionaries is really the most meaningful of his contributions for, in this chapter, one sees the author at his best. As Willinsky argues, "The dictionary, in turn, might be thought of as the textual embodiment of the school's authority to define the nature of differences in meaning" (p. 171). In fact, argues Willinsky, it has replaced the Bible as the commonplace source of meaning in many homes and at school. It is also here that the dictionary works to bring both understanding and silence to the terms of gender and difference. This is never more apparent when one begins to examine dictionaries for their approach to gender differences. What Willinsky uncovers is that dictionaries represent a male dominated view of the world of sexuality. In a lively discussion of this topic, he ably shows how terms such as vagina and penis (and clitoris) are represented in terms that deny the role of females in both reproduction and sexuality. In his review, one can easily catch a glimpse of the thoroughness with which he researched this subject. In this respect, he has done much to address the need for a more balanced approach to dictionary work and this is not just in the direction of a more feminist perspective; rather, as he suggests, his work points to the need for a more widely diverse and language focused view of how words come to have the meaning they do, as is found in his chapter on Wittgenstein. This is work that must have occupied his thinking for a number of years for one finds here elaborate references to the research he conducted while he was in England and later when he wrote up the results of his research. I found this chapter stimulating despite the elaborate working of the data that was done in Canada and at Oxford University. The follow-up chapter on Wittgenstein took me somewhat by surprise in that so few people ever use Wittgenstein as a support for their research. And yet, here we find he makes careful use of Wittgenstein to support his use of dictionary definitions. I must admit that this was personally pleasing to me, particularly as someone who studied Wittgenstein's work as a contribution to ordinary language philosophy. I would have liked to have seen more of Wittgenstein's writings on language in its larger sense instead of his focus upon individual words. However, the point of Willinsky's treatment of

Wittgenstein's writings was to support his work on dictionaries and Wittgenstein had a great deal to say about words in the *Investigations*.

I do not have much to say about the other chapters except to note that the last section to the book (Part Four) does deal with the personal and, in some respects, it is hard to make a strong argument for their inclusion as a text that deals with literacy. However, I am sure that John Willinsky could provide a strong argument for their inclusion and we might even be able to tempt him into writing further on this topic.

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