

Language Structure and Moral Education

by K. F. Nichols

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My theme is really the Socratic proposition that knowledge is virtue. This is an idea which is never far from the minds of those concerned either with literature or with education. Yet when we look into our own lives, the proposition seems obviously false. We know from our own experience the truth of *video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*. Most Catholics moreover, have been brought up to venerate (rightly but perhaps for the wrong reasons), *sancta simplicitas*, the faith of a Breton peasant; to feel that a lot of learning is a dangerous thing, and that nothing good ever came out of Cambridge – at least not since the time of St John Fisher.

Nevertheless we can see that there is something in the proposition, at any rate negatively. If it is not true that virtue necessarily accompanies knowledge, it is commonly true that crime accompanies ignorance. Robert Raikes, the founder of the Sunday School movement, wrote of the prisoners in Gloucester gaol for whom he was working in the 1770's; 'extreme ignorance was the principal cause of those enormities which brought them into this deplorable situation, precluding all hope of any lasting or real amendment from their punishment'. The uneducated classes a hundred years ago were still referred to as the 'criminal classes', and it remains true today that those social areas where education is least successful are also those where delinquency is most common. Ignorance is, in modern Western society anyway, at least a contributory cause of crime, and education, if not a cure for crime, would at any rate create, as Jeanne Hirsch said of politics, a vacuum within which something is possible.

The moral impulse in education has been closely linked with the notion, increasingly popular over the last hundred years or so, that education is also the chief instrument of social mobility. Much of the renaissance in educational activity at the turn of the eighteenth century was due to reaction to recent events in France, to the feeling that somehow education would make the unlettered classes docile, and maintain the stability of the social order. Towards the end of the century however, Robert Lowe said of the 1870 Act; 'We must compel our future masters to learn their letters'; recognizing the size and power of the forces that had been set in motion in the mean time. It was and still is, commonly believed that a determined educational attack on the class structure could

result in the destruction of those social forces which made in certain classes for unhappiness and delinquency.

This educational effort has had some remarkable success, but also some equally notable failure. It is based on the perhaps rather naive supposition that this social purpose of education can be achieved simply through an organization, simply by setting up a system offering theoretically equal educational opportunities to all. It founders on social forces with which it is doubtful whether education, as we conceive it now, is competent to deal. The administrative fiat; there shall be parity of esteem all round; was not in this instance, creative. Significantly, it is in precisely those classes where an improvement is most desired, that the drive for equality of opportunity in education meets with the most intractable resistance; the same resistance I believe, of which religious teachers are so acutely aware in the Secondary Modern Schools in the poorer areas of the big cities. These children, whatever their ability, do less well in selection tests, they adapt badly to Grammar School life, few of them persevere beyond Ordinary level, fewer still to further education. Research programmes are carried out to find out why this is so. Remedies are suggested, none of which seem particularly promising, but all agree that it is to the sociologists that we must turn for the answers.

We are acutely aware nowadays of social forces and the effect they have on individual behaviour. This awareness is in itself not new. St Augustine in the shrewd analysis he gives of his childhood escapade of robbing the orchard and stealing the hard pears comments; 'Alone I had never committed this theft wherein what I stole pleased me not, but that I stole. O friendship too unfriendly!' When it is said; let's go, let's do it, we are ashamed not to be shameless. The boys who steal sugar from parked lorries in the Liverpool dock road, might well plead similar social pressures in excuse, though they make rather a better thing out of it. Nowadays we are very ready, perhaps too ready, to explain educational failure and to excuse moral defections by reference to the group norms of the subculture to which those under discussion belong. The sociological forces—culture patterns, group norms, class attitudes, are succeeding the psychological forces, projection, rationalization, reaction formation as the mechanisms of yet another determinism.

Sociology prides itself, not always justifiably, on being a strictly empirical science of human behaviour. It yields a large number of social facts which it would be unreasonable not to agree must be connected somehow. But like the early behaviourist psychology, it concerns itself only with the visible facts and professes disinterest in the invisible process which links cause and effect. Like Pavlov it studies the external stimulus and the external response, but not the mental movement from the point of ignorance to the point of knowledge.

This question so important for education – by what process does a social structure become part of individual experience? – has however, recently been investigated by a sociologist, and it is his conclusions that I wish to discuss.

Dr Bernstein, who asks this question, answers it by saying that the internalizing of one's social background takes place through the process of learning language. The measurable linguistic differences which are found between the middle and lower working classes, reflect not particularly differences in intellectual capacity but different modes of speech which are dominant in, and typical of, these areas; the two languages of the two nations. The one he calls public, the other formal; the one is mainly descriptive, the other also analytic.

These two languages, he maintains, can be shown to differ both in the nature of their social functions and in their structure. The more a subject of dialogue is held in common, the more probable is it that speech will be condensed and abbreviated. The speech of children by themselves, of old married couples, of combat units in the forces, is of this kind. Where there is a wide basis of shared experience, a strong sense of community, there is less need to make meaning verbally explicit. A gesture towards a hinterland of shared experience is frequently sufficient. It is suggested that the public language is of this kind, that language in these social areas is not used to express individual separateness and difference but rather to increase consensus. Consequently the expression of personal opinion, intention or feeling is progressively inhibited by this language. The code used in terms of structure primarily, rather than vocabulary, tends to be limited and ready-made. The creative use of language is not encouraged.

Formal language on the other hand, is said to encourage individuation. It is sufficiently subtle in its structure to formulate shades of meaning, differences of opinion, cause, effect, reason, intention, one's own emotional states and those of others. The basic self-consciousness built up in infancy through the early experiences of the outside world, is a relatively crude affair. It rests half-submerged in the deep-shared life of the group, rather like the self-consciousness of primitive man. Here, firmly rooted in the family and the neighbourhood, it passively accepts its social heredity, the standards, values and beliefs held in common, almost as though in a collective unconscious. It is the word moving over the waters, which calls the biological and social individual, sometimes by way of a long and painful road, to the vocation of being the rational and historic person.

Public language may be said to discourage this process. Despite its warmth and vividness it is impersonal. It springs from the closely-knit group and reinforces the authority of group attitudes. It encourages a preference for the immediate, the unquestionably given, and corres-

pondingly, discourages curiosity, an interest in processes, in what is not obviously there. Consequently its habitual users tend to have poor powers of conceptualization, to have difficulty in handling abstract ideas, in organizing or following orderly lines of argument. Here is the effort of a working class boy of good average intelligence, to argue the case for capital punishment. 'Well it should do but it don't seem to nowadays, like there's still murders going on now, any minute now or something like that, they get people don't care they might get away with it then they all try it and might leak out one might tell his mates that he's killed someone it might leak out like it might get round he gets hung for it like that.' This difficulty in handling ideas is reflected in the I.Q. profiles of public language users. There tend to be no peaks in these but rather an all-round depression of performance even in science and mathematics.

This inhibiting process begins in the mother-child situation during the most formative years. The mother's own verbal habits form those of the child. As an illustration consider the following conversation between a working class mother and child who have come upon an electric fence. *Mother*. Don't touch that. *Child*. Why not? *Mother*. You'll get hurt. *Child*. Why? *Mother*. It's electric. *Child*. Why? *Mother*. Don't touch it I tell you.

Against a different social background, the incident might fall out in this way: *Mother*. Don't touch that darling. *Child*. Why not? *Mother*. Because it's an electric fence. *Child*. Why? *Mother*. Because the farmer has a motor over there that sends an electric current through the wire. If you touch it the current will go through you. *Child*. What's current? *Mother*. Now come along darling and don't make a fuss.

In the first case, the possibilities of learning inherent in the situation are cut off immediately by the application of the authority of the social relationship. In the second, the child is taken through an area of learning, a process of connection and sequence, before the axe eventually falls. The public language encourages the use and acceptance of the authority inherent in the social relationship.

There tends also to be a lack of emotional discrimination. Whereas the subtler formal language is able to link emotional states to a wide range of referents and so order them, the public language user tends not to verbalize emotion but to translate it into immediate action. So, if the emotional conflicts of adolescence can be verbalized, they may be rationally controlled. If not, they remain unconscious and so tend to find outlets in immediate action. Delinquency is said to be an inarticulate cry for help. The therapeutic value of such English teaching as that of David Holbrook is in the continual effort to help children to find words for their feelings. Here, as in the treatment of neuroses, the diagnosis and the acquired insight often goes a long way towards being the cure. Language lets the light of intelligibility into these experiences. The

intelligible is the source of the responsible ; formulation leads to insight, insight to control.

The restricted social function of public language, the fact that it communicates group rather than individual experiences, is reflected in the restricted code used, in the structure of the language itself ; and this in its turn has a feed-back effect, strengthening the power of group attitudes and reducing the possibilities of individuation. The characteristics of the language are measurable. The sentences are short, grammatically simple, frequently unfinished, the syntactical form poor, the active voice predominant. The simple coordinating conjunctions, so, but, and, then, are frequently and repetitively used ; adjectives and adverbs drawn from a very limited stock. What individual selection there is is from a standard group of idiomatic phrases. There is difficulty in holding a formal subject through a speech sequence, and in general a verbal planning function poor in range and variety. The formal language on the other hand is characterized by accurate grammatical order and syntax ; a complex structure mediating logical modifications especially through subordinate clauses ; the frequent use of conjunctions indicating logical relationships and individual selection from a good range of adjectives and adverbs.

Public language also tends to inhibit the development of feelings of guilt. This is because only a formal language makes it possible to verbalize subjective intent and motive. Middle-class parents tend to talk through a child's actions and so arouse awareness of and interest in cause and effect and in his motivational processes ; the feelings aroused are then manipulated in order to control his behaviour. 'If you do that you will be sorry later when all Teddy's stuffing comes out.' The working-class parent on the other hand will tend to use immediately the authority inherent in the social situation. The inability to verbalize tends to the naked use of authority, anger, bluster, the blow. This may not proceed from any worse will but from frustration at the inability to modify a child's behaviour from within along with the imperative necessity of modifying it somehow. The working-class parent will tend to use force, either in its immediate sense, or more remotely in the form of shame which, unlike guilt is a social and external pressure, being the loss of the group's approval. In *Lord of the Flies*, only Piggy, the one who can talk and argue, is able to formulate the questions which underlie the development of the boys' life. 'Which is better,' he asks, 'to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill ?' And as the book's climax approaches, he defends morality against the dark group forces which grip the others and control their behaviour. 'I don't ask for my glasses back, not as a favour. I don't ask you to be a sport I'll say, not because you're strong, but because what's right's right. Give me my glasses I'm going to say. You got to.' He points to a moral order which does not depend on the immediate social

relationship, but is independent of and above it – something in the very nature of social life itself.

This account of the growth of morality links closely with the account given from a different point of view by Piaget. He sees moral development as the gradual internalizing of moral principles; evolution from a moral order as fixed and external as the physical world and imposed by authority, to a morality freely chosen or accepted so that social life may go on; from a morality of constraint to one of co-operation.

Closely linked to the development of feelings of guilt is the development of notions of time. Language develops a sense of time, and with it the possibility of linking items in the present with the distant future, and so also, control of the present for the sake of the future.

‘Our concern was speech and speech impelled us

To purify the dialect of the tribe

And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight.’

Such a sense of past and future, such developed expectancies and anticipations, is not a characteristic of working-class language nor of working class life. Richard Hoggart has written of its interest rather in the immediate, the here and now! ‘Such a mind is I think, particularly accessible to the temptation to live in the constant present.’ Morality, too, demands the ordering of present and future goods, the relating of present behaviour to a distant ideal. Its development therefore is endangered by the temptation to live in the constant present.

In general, then, the exclusive use of public language hampers a child’s learning in all fields, particularly as the analytic, formal language is the language in which academic education is conducted; it discourages individuation and so personal responsibility. It is not suggested of course, that the two languages exist in isolation, but rather that they exist across a continuum. The middle-class child can use both – and so the possibilities offered by the formal language are open to him. Nor is it suggested of course that the virtues, the basic human good qualities are less present in the working class; but simply that our present social order offers particular difficulties to the development of some of them.

Professor Walsh has pointed out in *The Use of Imagination*, that the theory of language currently most popular is the theory of its incapacity. It is a barrier between the mind and reality, a closely woven curtain obscuring thought, an ill-fitting suit inadequately clothing ideas. The word suffers from the high prestige of the scientific symbol. Its meanings dissolve under the destructive analysis of philosophers. By the educational activists it is regarded as an impoverished second-hand substitute for experience. Few educational terms are more charged with contempt than ‘verbalism’, unless they be ‘bookish’ and ‘academic’. As Marcel has said, the being of language is submerged in its functions, and, to quote Professor Walsh again, a whole complexus of bleak and illiberal attitudes

obscures the liberating potency of the word. The theory I have just outlined on the other hand, seems to restore the prestige of language. Dr Bernstein's conclusions can be said in a general way to strengthen the claims of a liberal education; the fostering of the philosophic habit, in Newman's phrase, against the social, vocational, pragmatic purposes urged from every side.

We have seen that the effect of habitual use of the public language is to restrict the development of the character to certain social functions. This was also the aim of the most articulate opponent of the idea of a liberal education, John Dewey. 'Earlier psychology', he wrote, 'regarded mind as a purely individual affair in direct and naked contact with the external world. The tendency at present is to conceive individual mind as a function of social life, requiring continual stimulus from social agencies and finding its nutriment in social supplies.' The ill-concealed mechanism of 'function', 'stimulus', 'agencies', 'supplies' points to the sinister premiss that truly underlies Dewey's adjustment philosophy – the abolition of the individual personality itself. From his social individual, a line leads to the other-directed man of Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*, perfectly socialized but hollow inside, a well-oiled wheel in his own environment, but helpless in an unfamiliar one. Public language in the same way, strengthens the power of the environment over the child. Within his own world he is at ease; exposed to the disturbing phenomenon of formal analytic language and dimly, perhaps subconsciously, aware of its implications, he is defensive and hostile. This hostility can be thought of as the work of the defensive mechanisms of withdrawal or aggression operating to protect the social order and the personal security in it which is threatened.

This defensive wariness so often felt by teachers of 'academic' subjects in Secondary Modern schools, the difficulty in making available to working-class children the possibilities of the formal language, should not be underrated. There is a wealth of literature now, on and by those whom Richard Hoggart calls the uprooted and the anxious. 'Their sense of loss,' he writes, 'is increased precisely because they are emotionally uprooted from their class, often under the stimulus of a stronger critical intelligence or imaginative qualities which can lead them into an unusual self-consciousness before their own situation and make it easy for the sympathizer to dramatize their angst'. It is indeed easy to exaggerate; the objectivity of the most considerable study of the educationally uprooted, that of Jackson and Marsden in *Education and the Working Class*, has recently been questioned. Nevertheless the problem is a real one. There is no guarantee that to set a child on the road to a greater self-consciousness through language is to set him on the road to a happier or a better life. However, it seems that in the contemporary intellectual and social situation, the attempt must be made even though

success is uncertain. The only protection, to misquote Rousseau, against the world and ourselves, is a thorough knowledge of both.

The first condition of success seems to be a restoration of language to its central position in education. We should set our faces against facile evasive suggestions that all our educational inequalities can be ironed out by some organizational magic, or by architects or by electronics engineers or by the Treasury. We must keep visual aids, teaching machines, television programmes in the auxiliary place that is rightly theirs; reject the meretricious proclamations that one picture is worth a thousand words.

The public language, I have suggested, reflects the nature of the social group. It is selectively structured by the social relationship, and this structure in its turn encourages the formulation of certain experiences and inhibits others, so transmitting the social heredity. It seems therefore that we might look again at the teaching of and practice in language structure. This is out of fashion, I dare say rightly, because the arid gerund-grinding study of grammar appeared to be a mere theoretical exercise, and to have little if any effect on a child's linguistic skill. All the same it may be possible to teach grammar without tears, and to give formal practice in language construction. Traditional grammar is unacceptable because it was artificial, because it was taught independently of content and style, but there seems no reason why it should not be linked to creative writing. Something similar is done in the teaching of art. Moreover traditional grammar teaching was analytic whereas synthesis would seem to provide a better, more interesting and satisfying exercise. It is significant that at a time when the teaching of the concepts and skills connected with number is being revolutionized through intensive research and experiment, little seems to be done to discover the best ways of teaching language skills except through interesting but rather random individual enterprise.

It is said that language is caught not taught, and of course there is a lot in this. Much could be done in the way of exposure if teachers, especially in junior schools, before the defensive mechanisms begin to operate, spoke to their children in well-constructed sentences and worried less about talking the children's own language. More still could be done if they had smaller classes. One of the most promising suggestions in the Newsom Report is that problem schools in poor social districts might be given a specially favourable staffing ratio. Constant contact with a sympathetic adult seems the most promising way of opening up the possibilities of formal language to these children.

I haven't mentioned the practice of creative writing itself, though the success of David Holbrook's work shows how much can be done here with linguistically handicapped children given a sympathetic personality and some good ideas. It is commonly recommended however, that

children should be encouraged to write about their own environment in their own language, and from our immediate point of view, the value of this seems questionable. I have always been a little suspicious of these semi-intelligible pieces of pithy Anglo-Saxon writing which are still held up for our admiration as examples of the surviving folk art of North Essex. Doubtless this has its value – a therapeutic value like that of self-expression in other media such as paint and movement which are not socially structured. But from our point of view it seems that writing about one's own environment in its public language is likely only to reinforce its limiting character – the dominant social attitudes suppressing the 'liberating potency of the word'. It would seem better that children should be encouraged to take pains with the structure of their writing, and should write, at least sometimes, about subjects remote from their experience, social situations quite different from their own.

One might make a final short comment on the moral and religious problems raised. One of the features in modern religious education, as well as in moral theology, is the theme of personal commitment, involvement, engagement, the free choice by the individual in an open society of the Christian way, truth and life; the building up of a personal relationship, through the church with Christ, through Christ with the Trinity. This theme one hears in various forms on every side. Thus Dr Küng: 'It doesn't seem to me to be one of the worst features of our age that it forces us to make a decision. Faith isn't something you can simply get by inheritance, like any other characteristic of body or soul. Even baptism is no use unless it is matched with the decision of faith.' Similarly, Canon Cardijn's See-Judge-Act technique is a training in personal responsibility. Not all of those who propound these ideas seem aware of the very great difficulty of putting them into practice. The person whose linguistic background causes him to be deeply immersed in his social group finds very great difficulty in striking out on his own, having his own personal beliefs, making his own personal decisions, building up his own personal relationships. Moreover, the language through which these beliefs are taught to him, and by which this relationship is built up is necessarily an unfamiliar one. This is not merely because the teaching given is a digest of an abstract scholastic essentialist theological system. You can be as kerygmatic as you like and the reaction will still be defensive. It is a matter of the relationship demanded and the conflict roused with the attitudes of the group. This is not to say however, that a good deal could not be done to simplify the structure and terminology of religious teaching; as well as to make it more psychologically apt to the various stages of a child's development. A good example of this difficulty can be seen in the teaching of the theology of sin and penance. We are rightly advised that what should be stressed here is the breaking and restoration of a relationship, not the external punishment nor the mechanical undoing

of the harm done. Yet it is in precisely these latter terms that working-class parents tend to react to their children's misdeeds. It becomes progressively more difficult to make relevant those subjective feelings and motives on which a personal relationship is based.

Nevertheless it seems that this process of moral and religious individuation must be attempted. We cannot go back to the wheelwright's shop. Yet it should be undertaken with a full awareness of the difficulties, and without, humanly speaking much certainty of success in individual cases. We must expect to have our share of the religiously uprooted and anxious. These may be helped by some of the other features of this Christian era; by the new stress on the social relevance of the faith, concern for the welfare of the whole human community, of the underprivileged and the hungry, concern about the problems of peace and war. Most of all they might be helped by a renewal of parish life, the building up of a true Christian community reflecting the unity and charity of the Church's inner life. Of this community, a comprehensible liturgy might prove to be the public language.

On London Bridge by Roman Gorzelski

It lies on its back
Reflecting the sky,
It swims, waving with oars,
It liquefies inside itself,
Flaunts the abundance of its waters,
Sometimes shutting its waves,
And then letting no-one out
Onto the riverside –
This river.

(translated from the Polish by Anthony Black)