

BOOKS

Review of J. Mitchell Morse, THE IRRELEVANT ENGLISH TEACHER

PHILADELPHIA: TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1972

Why did I order this book for the library? Surely we already had enough surveys and commission reports on the teaching of English, but this book, several reviews suggested, would be different ("scrappy, contentious," said The Hudson Review). This would be a lively, one-man performance that would reassure us of the dignity of our profession and the importance of our task.

Chapter headings promise a lively variety. Samples: "The Case for Irrelevance," "Our Linguistic Servility," "Social Class in the English Class," "The Shuffling Speech of Slavery: Black English," "Who Should Teach Freshman English?" and "Take for Example Finnegan's Wake." Professor Morse also obliges us with a list of themes that are to be found in this little book, and those are often encouraging and just as often provocations to debate. Once again, a few samples:

We are perishing for lack of style.

Good writing is relevant to itself. It need not be relevant to anything else.

The difference between good writing and bad is objectively demonstrable.

The contemplation of a well-made sentence is the second greatest pleasure in life. The greatest is to write such a sentence. What did you think it would be?

Full professors should teach freshman English.

The book is refreshing--for a time. There is some satisfaction in meeting a writer so unabashedly sure that his position is right and so ready to quote Samuel Johnson: "Sir, treating your adversary with respect is giving him an advantage to which he is not entitled." (The adversary now is anyone who scorns precise language.) Morse may indeed be called scrappy and contentious when he picks out a passage from a current textbook on style and calls the writing "pitiful slop." Here is an academic whose terms

are not restrainedly academic. And I am inclined to like someone who likes plays on words, who can quote with unashamed enjoyment King Arthur's question to Guenevere, "Who was that last knight I seen you with, lady?" and whose contempt for moral maxims leads him to such strained efforts as "Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives subliminal and departing leave behind us foot-prints of a nut or criminal." And who includes "virgin" in a list of mythical beings.

But there is much that is respectable and solid: reasonable statements about a standard language, a real concern with form, with the joys of art, with precision in vocabulary to achieve expression. There is consistent concern with the need to teach writing: freshman English is an important course, and "literature and composition should be taught together at all levels including the graduate level."

The more I read, however, the clearer it became that, if these essays were frequently exciting, they could also be repetitious, contradictory, and narrowly elitist.

The repetition is understandable, if not totally forgivable, when we realize that the volume is a gathering of articles that have appeared in English journals and speeches given before professional audiences. Some things--the same things--are going to be said more than once. The diversity of the chapters and themes is therefore more apparent than real.

The contradiction centers about the key word, relevance. Sounding like the New Critics in the first flush of examining literature "as such" Professor Morse states flatly that "in the classroom I preach irrelevance. . . . As an English teacher I cannot with any conscience invite my students to read kitsch as literature or literature as sociology. . . . Relevance be damned, I say."

In fact, however, Morse's own position as a "secular political liberal" or "liberal intellectual" is never really removed from his literary sympathies. Eliot is a reactionary. With religious writers Morse is especially careful to make clear that their values are not his. He can enjoy St. Augustine's Confessions but does not subscribe to his beliefs. "In the beginning was the Word" is a commendable verse, but one doesn't have to accept what the words say. Why is it necessary to say, "I reject St. Augustine's religious, political, and social ideas" if we are dealing with literary appreciation per se? The basic contradiction, finally, is seen in the consistent argument that a close study of good writing makes for a critical habit of mind, which, in turn, leads to political and social enlightenment. The case for irrelevance becomes a brief for relevance.

The "narrow elitism" may be a tautology, I suppose, for whoever heard of a wide elitism? But I'll let it stand. Most of us, I imagine, share Morse's disdain for language which is just a cut above no language at all. ("Like they can't say what they mean because like you know like they don't know what they mean"--his example.)

But the disquieting conviction overtakes me that the writer is not including me in his circle. His judgments are arbitrary and authoritarian, even to matters of pronunciation. Regional dialects are suspect. I am on the outside when Morse says calmly that only a handful of writers, mostly modern and avant-garde, deserve our respect: Grass, Stevens, Beckett, Joyce, Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, Böll, Hawkes, etc. Actually, we are told, only two writers, Beckett and Nabokov, are renewing the language; perhaps a score of writers are simply not sapping it--and all the rest are. Such confines are too close.

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