Rethinking English in Schools: Towards a New and Constructive Stage
Edited by Viv Ellis, Carol Fox and Brian Street
London & New York: Continuum (2007)

A product of the "Why English?" conference held in Oxford in October 2006, this volume is somewhat afflicted by the problems which beset many such collections. The individual papers gesture at more extensive, more fully-articulated arguments that the contributors have made elsewhere, while the whole ensemble leaves unexplored important tensions and contradictions among the contributions. There is consensus, to be sure, that something needs to be done about the parlous state of English, but it's not at all clear that the contributors agree on what that something is.

The central problem is outlined with admirable clarity, both by the editors in their introduction and by Tony Burgess in the opening essay. What Burgess calls the "intellectual project of English" has been displaced by a new managerialism. It is not simply that teachers' work has become, in the past two decades, much more closely regulated, but rather that the nature of that work has been radically redefined. In the new dispensation, what counts is teachers' performance against measurable (and ever more frequently measured) targets and objectives. If there have been gains in transparency and accountability, Burgess suggests, what has been lost is the sense of English teachers as active collaborators in an inquiry into learning and learners, into questions of pedagogy and of the place of the subject.

Any temptation that there might have been to hark back to a golden age of English is swiftly corrected by Patrick Walsh's essay, which traces the roots of the subject in the history of British imperialism. It was in the British colonies, from India to Ireland, that subject English was first fashioned as a tool to serve the interests of imperialist rule. Devised in Ireland and then exported both to other colonies and to school in England itself, the Irish National School Board's graded reading primers were, Walsh comments, an "ideological cornerstone of the system":

> Although understandably unremarked on by their enthusiasts in places like Ontario, it was their detachment from the specifics of locale that made them so peculiarly adaptable. They also encouraged a view of the world that placed Britain, Christianity and the English language at the normative centre from which social and moral value and effective political power derived supreme authority (57).

The description of these nineteenth-century textbooks bears an uncanny resemblance to the centralised curricula of our own times. There is no contradiction between this part of the history of English and Tony Burgess's reflections on the shifting perspectives within and towards the Vygotskyan strand of intellectual work in English. But Walsh is right to insist that this, more troubling, perspective on English needs to be taken seriously, not only if we are to understand where a section in the GCSE *Anthology* headed "Poems

from Different Cultures" might come from, but also if we are to confront the forces that are implicated in any struggle for the future of English.

The editors make a claim for the originality of this collection in its focus on the "why" – the "purposes and rationales for English as a school subject" – where other attempts to confront the problem of English have tended to concentrate on the "what" (questions of content) or the "how" (questions of method or pedagogy). I am not sure how tenable this distinction is in practice: to ask what English is *for* cannot meaningfully be separated from questions of what English *is* – and, indeed, many of the contributions wrestle with the content of the English curriculum as a way of addressing the possible purposes of the subject (once it has been adequately rethought).

Thus, for example, in Carol Fox's argument for the place of comics and graphic novels in English, the exploration of the content of the works – both their intensely serious subject matter and the complexity of the ways in which the multimodal affordances of the genre are deployed in the telling of highly layered, selfconscious tales – constitutes the grounds for their inclusion with an expanded category of literature. But the territory that Fox marks out here is, simultaneously, that of a particular conception of what English is – namely, a site within which efferent and aesthetic readings of texts combine in powerful ways to enable students to learn more about reading and more about the world – and, inextricably, a statement of what English is for.

Other contributors are also keen to stress the importance of the aesthetic in a rethought version of English. Joy Alexander provides a critique of the commodification of literacy and the reduction of English to a set of separately teachable and testable skills. In place of the subject as it is constituted, Alexander argues for an increased emphasis on the aesthetic. She suggests that "English classrooms at the present time are afflicted by a surfeit of efferent reading," exemplified by the "tendency to read poems or extracts from novels not for their own sake but because they are good vehicles for teaching personification, use of adjectives, etc.", while elsewhere in the curriculum reading will "almost always be efferent."

Similarly, Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan defend the significance of literature (albeit an ecumenical notion of literature, encompassing *The Bill* as well as *King Lear*) within an account of English as particular kinds of engagement with texts, or perhaps with particular kinds of text. What characterises such engagement is that it is both personal and social, both particular and general, both rational and emotional. Presenting a vision of students operating in the aesthetic mode, as readers and writers, they suggest that such work happens on three fronts, textual, ethical and experiential. For Misson and Morgan, the texts are constitutive of the readers, while in a footnote they display an attachment to that elusive figure, the "ideal reader" (and appear to dismiss different reading positions as merely idiosyncratic).

However much I would want to join with Alexander, Misson and Morgan in arguing for a reinstatement of aesthetic and ethical concerns in English, I want to outline three areas of disagreement. First, it won't do to describe the

current ways of working with text as privileging efferent reading. In coining the term, Rosenblatt (1938) was very clear that efferent approaches to reading were *practical* – they were to get things done. So to categorise a reading as efferent is to say something about the reader's purposes – and to imply that the act of reading is purposive. But the kind of practice that Alexander describes has as its most salient attribute its utter futility: adjective-spotting is *not* getting something done, as the boredom that hangs over the activity in the classroom amply demonstrates; it is reading for *no* real purpose (and thus quite unlike the element of efferent reading that Carol Fox identifies in her students' encounters with Spiegelman's *Maus*, say). Second, I worry about arguments for the aesthetic that seem to locate the issue exclusively within subject English. There are other curricular areas – Art and Photography, Music, Drama, for instance – within which intensely serious attention is paid to aesthetic and ethical aspects of students' learning; in such spaces, students continue to thrive as active participants in acts of cultural production. My third objection is linked to this: an adequate account of the aesthetic in English – one that would move decisively beyond an Arnoldian faith in the properties of the texts themselves – needs to pay more attention to the agency of the learners.

This last issue emerges in a different guise in the contribution from Bob Fecho. Having sketched a theoretical framework that seeks to synthesise Rosenblatt's transactional theory with Bakhtinian perspectives and both with Gordon's Africana Existentialism, Fecho focuses attention on the tales of two readers, young men whom he defines as marginalised: both are working class, one is bipolar, the other gay. Fecho shows how Isaac and Andy "despite or perhaps due to their various marginalizations were actively constructing facets of their identities through literacy transactions." Fecho counterposes Andy's engagement with contemporary young adult literature with the floundering indifference of his classroom encounters with Shakespeare. This may very well be the case, but what conclusions are we to draw from this? That the canon needs to be expanded? That there might have been other (better?) ways of doing Shakespeare in the classroom? Because English is and should be a site where important identity work is done, it is always necessary to interrogate the criteria whereby texts are chosen (or excluded). Questions of representation are, rightly and inevitably, foregrounded in the field of English studies, but such questions are not reducible to a programmatic insistence on some sort of one-for-one correspondence between the reader's identity and the characters, values, histories represented in a text.

We need an account of what readers do with texts that is attentive to the power, subtlety and creativity of the meanings that are made in and beyond the classroom. The contributions in the final section of this volume go some way towards providing such an account, though whether the picture that emerges is recognisable as English is uncertain. Perhaps, as Brian Street suggests in a piece that both promotes and enacts the hybridisation of New Literacy Studies and Multimodality, the label is not important; what matters, he argues, is that there is a curricular space capacious enough to carry on the

work of critical reflexivity in relation to a plurality of genres, languages and semiotic modes.

At the end of their fascinating and trenchantly-argued attack on the dominant monolingualism of the school curriculum, Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu offer the prospect of a multilingual approach in which learners are positioned as "active participants in the creation and recreation of language and its constitution of their world." Suzanne Miller, likewise, insists on a curriculum and a pedagogy that bridges "the divide between home/community literacy practices and school in ways that honour students' competence with out-of-school languages and literacies." In her sketch of the City Voices City Visions Digital Video Composing Project (see www.gse.buffalo.edu/org/cityvoices/) in Buffalo, New York, Miller outlines ways in which digital technologies are being used to reposition students as "competent, creating designers of multimodal meaning instead of just consumers."

Whether this initiative and others like it amount to an answer to the question, "Why English?" seems less certain. Maybe the questions that conferences pose are often best answered back in classrooms (and other sites of learning) after the participants have dispersed.

ROSENBLATT, L. M. (1938) *Literature as Exploration,* New York, The Modern Language Association of America.

SPIEGELMAN, A. (1987 & 1992) *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (2 vols.) London: Penguin