

Mastering English

CONSIDER STUDENTS' capabilities and students' needs when teaching them language. That is the message, based on years of experience, from WALTER SAUNDERS, professor of English, in an analysis of difficulties facing black students today.

IN AN earlier article for Reality, Professor Saunders wrote of the poor reading ability of many blacks handicapped by a flawed system that perpetuates itself, "producing teachers who do not read, who in turn produce students who do not read".

IN THIS issue he discusses the choice of prescribed reading material.

"UNTIL there is considerable language mastery and until there is considerable experience of current literature, reflecting current, and even local, issues and concerns, there is little sense in compelling students to grapple with books about remote events, written in a highly complex and antiquated style - for example Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy.

"SINCE the early '60s there has been a marvellous outpouring of African literature in English. It is of current interest. It is accessible. Much of it is excellent. That is what we should be prescribing."

MOST BLACK students entering tertiary institutions and registering to major in English, have never studied English poetry at all, or at most only a few poems, and those, as likely as not, ill-chosen and unappealing.

There seems to be little concern for the suitability of introductory material in this sensitive area of study. The main reason why the matric poetry option is so seldom taught in black schools is because it is beyond the comprehension of students and, if the truth be known, of most of the teachers, too.

Twentieth century poetry is partly to blame for this: Eliot, Pound and the whole abstruse modern tribe. As a result of this idiosyncratic and elitist development, there is a general notion, particularly in black schools (and again I'm thinking of the teachers as much as the students) that poetry must be very difficult, or it is of inferior quality.

Blue Black and other poems published by Hodder & Stoughton Educational was compiled in part to combat this notion and the negative response to poetry that it helps to foster. The object of the book is the introduction of poetry to black second-language students and it contains material for two, three or even more years of study.

It is prescribed at university and teachers' training colleges on the assumption that most incoming students have not studied poetry before. It might with equal success be introduced to students in Std 8 or 9.

The book has three sections. The first begins with poems that are simple and short — but good nonetheless. They gradually increase in length and complexity.

All these poems are written in free verse and the idiom they employ is present-day English. Most of the poems are from modern Africa, but a fair number are from Ancient Egypt, Greece and Israel, and Japan (the haiku) — all in accessible modern translations. Ten were written by black students at the University of Bophuthatswana and the Mgwenya College of Education in the eastern Transvaal. These were included, partly for their intrinsic merit, and partly to encourage those who study the book to write poetry too.

ONE OF the objects of the book is the encouragement of creative writing. The guide contains a number of

suggestions and creative exercises, generally related to the poems themselves.

You may be surprised that I recommend creative writing for struggling second-language students, but in my experience they find it a lot easier than trying to master the writing of academic prose. In creative writing they are dealing very largely with the immediate, the familiar and the concrete, not the remote and abstract. In my experience students discover a creativity they did not know they possessed — a sad comment on their previous 12 or 15 years of so-called education! They gain in confidence in the writing of English and they become more sensitive to both language and literature.

The second section of *Blue Black* consists of longer poems and passages in free verse, still with a strong African emphasis. Here the student is introduced to the originator of modern free verse, Walt Whitman, and to D.H. Lawrence. The student is also introduced to epic poetry: there are two passages from a modern translation of Homer's *Iliad*, and six passages from Mazisi Kunene's own translation from the Zulu of his *Emperor Shaka the Great*.

The third section consists of a brief survey of English and American poetry in traditional metre and rhyme, from Chaucer to the present. This section is in many ways similar to standard anthologies, but it has three newish elements. First: metre and rhyme are introduced through the poetry of the 20th century Zulu poet, H.I.E. Dhlomo. Second: there are a number of poems and passages that deal vividly with themes like tyranny and freedom. Examples of these are passages from Byron's *The Isles of Greece* and Shelley's *Ode to Liberty* and Wordsworth's sonnet *To Toussaint l'Ouverture*.

Few, if any, of the students have ever heard of the remarkable subject of this poem. Toussaint l'Ouverture was the first black leader to throw off white rule and win freedom for his country, now called Haiti. He became the victim of reactionary forces, and died in one of Napoleon's bleakest prisons in 1803. In his compassionate poem, Wordsworth sees Toussaint as epitomising man's struggle for freedom and justice.

A third factor in this section is the favouring of poems and passages, related



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to ancient Greek history and legend, particularly the story of Helen and the fall of Troy. These stories are introduced, partly for their intrinsic interest and beauty, and partly because they have been constantly re-woven into the fabric of English literature.

There are introductions to each section of the anthology and there is a guide to many of the poems. It was designed to a large extent for private study.

This is also true of the second 'new text' I wish to discuss: *Julius Caesar*, abridged and modernised, the first of a projected series I have undertaken for the introduction of Shakespeare (published by Centaur, Pietermaritzburg).

THE VERY thought of altering a Shakespearean text in any way, is offensive to many devoted Shakespearean scholars, and also to many more people who have never read Shakespeare at all.

Shakespeare wrote first and foremost to give pleasure. He taught, too, and exalted the mind of his audience. But first he captivated that mind by setting the imagination on fire — the best pleasure of all.

This he did by the immediacy and colour of his lines. It was the way his lines reflected the world around him in speech and imagery and thought that gave his plays their immediacy, however remote their subject matter may have seemed.

That so much of this immediacy can still be felt nearly four centuries later is a measure of Shakespeare's genius. But with the changes of language and thought and the very *imagery* of the world around us, a great deal of that immediacy has been lost.

We attempt to find it again, by means of glossaries and footnotes and illustrations of various kinds. A large part of Shakespearean scholarship has this explicatory end in view. And the more the Shakespearean scholar can recover for himself of the original immediacy and convey it to others, the better scholar he is. But his task is an endless one. He can at best be somewhere along the way.

Yet we think of compelling young people to read a full Shakespearean text with all its difficulties, the most marked of all being those resulting from the loss

of immediacy.

To do this is to show an insensitivity, both to the young people and to Shakespeare. And, as in all things, the system gets the result it deserves: when they leave school, not one student in a thousand (or is it ten thousand?) will ever again look at a Shakespearean text.

There is a measure of failure for you! And now I am no longer referring only to second-language students, but even more particularly to first-language students, because it is their literary heritage, to which they are being denied fair access, through the system's incompetence and insensitivity.

THERE IS a growing lobby to omit the teaching of Shakespeare altogether in schools, and if there is no change in the way Shakespeare is introduced and 'taught', I side with that lobby.

But, there is a way of turning the generally negative response to Shakespeare in schools (and even tertiary institutions) into a more positive one: first, by introducing his work in abridged versions; and, second, by modernising the text.

It is more rewarding for students who are being introduced to Shakespeare to get to know several plays in abridged forms in the course of a year, than it is for them to be made to plod laboriously through one complete text.

Modernisation helps to restore the lost immediacy. It enables a fluent reading, unhampered (or far less hampered) by the constant need to refer to the glossary and other learning aids. It provides a more direct access to what Shakespeare is saying.

What is lost is much but by no means all of the poetry. This version of *Julius Caesar* may, in part, be compared to a translation of a work from another language. An inevitable loss occurs, but the gain lies in those who are unable to read the original, or who can only read it with difficulty, being able to read with relative ease. The gain is one of communication and of consequent interest. And, of course, the original text is never really lost: it is always there for students to read — not because they have been compelled to do so, but because their interest has been aroused. ●

BOOK REVIEW:

Addressing key issues relevant to change

Spiegel A.D. and McAllister P.A. **Transition and Tradition in Southern Africa**, a festschrift for Philip and Iona Mayer. African Studies Fiftieth Anniversary volume. Vol. 50, Nos 1 and 2, 1991.

PHILIP and IONA MAYER were largely responsible for bringing the anthropology of the Eastern Cape out of the antiquarian rural paradigms and into the vital contemporary scene. Their reputation rests firmly on the Xhosa in Town trilogy and especially on *Townsmen or Tribesmen* which was the second volume.

From that work developed the voluminous but unpublished manuscripts of the migrant labour project which provided the editors and two other of the contributors to the present volume with important research opportunities. Some of that work appeared in *Black Villagers in an Industrial Society* edited by Mayer in 1980 (Oxford UP) with which *Tradition and Transition* invites comparison.

Tradition and Transition has no authoritative (and contentious) introduction from the editors. Rather, its tone is set by a gentle biographical piece in which William Beinart, a historian, demonstrates the skills of the anthropologist rather better than some of the other contributors. Dunbar Moodie picks up the overused idea of "resistance" in a pre-N.U.M. account of how miners integrate the ideologies of "work" at home and in compound. John Argyle casts the process of urbanisation in a much more positive light, using a comparison of dramatic performances to highlight the adaptation of individuals to their larger scale societies. Performance integrates experience and gives it both meaning and expression, subverting the tired dichotomies of the people of "two worlds". Robin Palmer subverts another tired dichotomy — that between the South African experience and all others — in a lively application of

