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It Pays to Be Patient, a Review of: Joan Peskin & David I. Hanauer: A Life with Poetry. The Development of Poetic Literacy. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins 2023).

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

A review of the book by Joan Peskin and David Hanauer, describing the development of poetic literacy, both through natural maturation and through education.

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For over forty years now I have been waiting for a book that establishes a firm framework for the teaching of poetry, or indeed of literature in general. None has been forthcoming so far. Not that there haven't been some (mostly loose) ideas, some of which are common sense, some questionable, and some which have been downright silly or even dangerous. The consequences of one such proposal can now be seen in The Netherlands, where the radical subjective interpretation of literature teaching was widely adopted in the 1980s: "tinker-didactics" became the catch word: students can pass a test for literature by constructing a box containing replicated scenes from a book – whether that book has been read or not. The journal *De Groene Amsterdammer* recently quipped about students in Dutch schools today, "although they are at the age when Anne Frank wrote her diary, we don't even assume they can read it now." (20.20.2022, p. 37) The situation may be less dramatic in other countries, but I believe it is no exaggeration to say that there is a general *malaise* among teachers at all levels when it comes to the question of how to teach literature. And that is no wonder: for forty years now, attempts to provide a sound approach to the teaching of literature have been unsystematic, aimless, and especially without any anchorage in a knowledge- and evidence-based approach to teaching. But that has changed now, with this new book by Joan Peskin and David Hanauer. Finally, finally. After 40 years or more, there is a volume that sets out a clear and sound framework that may help teachers (and teacher trainers) to develop a sound pedagogy in which the learning of literature may thrive and yield knowledge and wisdom in the next generation.

The authors declare their intention as explicating "the processes of poetic literacy related to age differences and experience. Simply put, this book describes what we know about how students' poetry reading and writing develops from pre-school to expert/professional readers and poets. (...) This research is scattered across several different disciplines (...) One of the challenges of this book is to bring this diverse set of disciplinary studies together into one presentation and to adequately review the knowledge that already exists." (p. 11) Or: "This volume therefore addresses questions concerning how developmental research contributes to the teaching of poetry. (...) Further we hope that this book will be a useful resource for instructors." (p. 12)

Consequently, the chapter following the introduction is an overview of general theories of development, from Piaget and Vygotsky through to current neurological research. The authors facilitate the overview of such a vast inter-disciplinary enterprise by portraying the various approaches within five different directions: theories about expertise, stage theory, Egan's sequence of understandings, (non)spontaneous (scientific) concepts, and representational redescription theory. They further devote attention to emotional and attitudinal influences on cognition, and to more recent neurophysiological research. The different strands are drawn together in a general model, graphically summarized in a box linking the interdependence of brain development, cognitive development, and an individual's concrete interaction with the world.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of various theoretical positions with respect to the reading of poetry, but supplemented by empirical research on poetry reading, especially with respect to phonological and graphic features, emotional responses – and again coupled to developmental patterns. While brain maturation is obviously necessary for knowing how to deal with poetry, without knowledge of schemata to do this, poetic interpretation will not emerge of itself. It is here that education plays a central role.

Chapter 4 then describes the road toward a full-blown poetic literacy. It may thus be considered one of the central chapters in the book. It reviews two research traditions in examining this development. One is to trace the limitations on 'natural' maturation; the other method consists of comparing adult expert readers to novice readers. Needless to say, the former possess a richer repertory of interpretative strategies. More important, however, is how all relevant empirical research points to children's very early sensitivity to poetic devices. The authors lay considerably emphasis on the say-mean distinction, and how it develops over the years. They do so rightly, I believe, for here poetry reaches into the depth of everyday language, where we often use language in a labyrinthine way, not because we are sloppy in our language habits, but because such poetic usage is often the most direct way to convey a complex message. This is certainly an area where poetry and everyday language gently touch each other, and therefore stands in need of more thorough research.

It is impossible in a brief review like this to do justice to the fullness of data, insights and comparisons the book offers. The authors meticulously describe the various studies that have been carried out, and there are many more than I had imagined. More important than the results of the individual studies, is a general model proposed by the authors, in which they both visually and table-wise illustrate how poetic literacy develops from kindergarten age to poetry experts. Such models are badly needed, not as an end in themselves, but because they form the beginning of a research program that can now be systematically investigated. They are an important step toward progress in understanding how we develop poetically during our lives.

The two following chapters deal with the development of poetry *writing*. I must confess my surprise at this lengthy treatment, while acknowledging that this is a genuine topic for research in poetics, and granting that the writing of poetry is certainly part of poetic literacy. But poetry *writing* does not, as far as I know, form part of any school curriculum, at least in Europe. Nor is it a social imperative: while we certainly wish to better understand what is involved in becoming an expert poet, these are not, I believe, urgent desiderata for our societies.

Chapters 7 and 8 then lead to the major pedagogical issues. They offer a combination of research data together with a theoretical frame to further investigate the different approaches to the teaching of poetry. This leads to a categorization of programs, which the authors aptly classify as the:

- Traditional Approach
- Formalist/Structuralist Approach
- Personal Development/Text Experiencing Approach
- Sociological Approach.

Crucial is that the existing research on literary development shows that there are benefits to each of these separate approaches at different ages and at different times. This matters insofar as discussions about the way to teach literature over the past generation have been of a mono-methodological kind: each approach claimed to be the only road to successful learning. Where such claims have been monopolized, as for instance in The Netherlands, the results have been just short of disastrous. The end of chapter 8 provides a more balanced view of the matter, in proposing a list of six principles of poetry pedagogy.

Chapter 9, finally, aims to integrate the previous insights into a general outline for poetry education. The authors' credo is spelt out clearly, by stating that "the genre of poetry is clearly a learnt form that depends on culture, community and education" (p. 148). But that means that the younger generation has to be educated. Any *laissez-faire* attitude will not achieve that. As a general outline of such an education, we may be guided by a clear and laudable blueprint:

The clearest educational and cultural contribution to the development of poetic literacy is in advancing students' acquisition of the communal toolkit. This involves their gaining the requisite knowledge, conventional expectations, poetic devices and their aesthetic effects, patterns of particular poets, and historical knowledge of schools and periods of poetry. (p. 152)

The authors also warn against 'presentism': "If modern readers do not have the knowledge of the canonical rules and conventions the writer has used, the resulting error may be "presentism", a default psychological propensity for an interpretive community to select a context from their contemporary social world." (*ibid.*) If these guidelines would be in place in our educational system, much would already be gained – though not all.

This publication shows that it pays to be patient: after forty years of waiting, there now finally is a manual that allows a systematic treatment of poetic pedagogy. It would be wrong, however, to see this as a final statement. On the contrary, a lot of work awaits us here: there is no general agreement on the objectives of teaching literature, teachers are helpless, and the academic field is in a muddle. There are no clear concepts of what it is we wish to achieve in the study of poetry in school. Let us hope that we won't have to wait another forty years before we clean up our mess. If we finally do get down to it, it will be thanks to the work by Peskin and Hanauer.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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