The Spectator as Theorist: Britton and the Functions of Writing

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We can learn much about teaching writing from James Britton. Against the cries of countless textbooks for Clarity and Structure, he reminds us that our language is first of all a way for us to be with one another, to commune as well as to communicate. Against the over-riding concerns of most teachers with issues of control in writing, with the conscious planning and revising of texts, he urges us to trust more to our natural and spontaneous ability to use words to find out what we're trying to say as we say it, to shape meaning at the point of utterance. And against a system of schooling which uses writing largely as a tool for testing, so that most of what our students write is destined less to be read than it is to be corrected, he insists that no one can learn to write well without first being given the chance to write about what matters to her, for a reader who will respond to not merely the form but also the sense of what she has to say.

All this points us toward a far more open and sane practice of teaching than has often been the case. It is unfortunate, then, that what Britton is best known for — his theory of the functions of writing — should be at odds, in crucial ways, with how he would have us work with language in the classroom. For while he has often argued that our views of the world and our places in it are formed in large part through the stories we tell one another, his theory of the functions separates the telling of such stories from our other more "transactional" uses of language, making it seem a special "poetic" concern only. And while Britton clearly most values language for the opportunities it offers us for play, intimacy, and self-expression, his theory defines a literary work as a "verbal object . . . a unity that is isolated from the ordinary traffic of existence" (1984, p. 322). We find, then, in his theory, the human concerns involved in a transactive view of language uneasily joined to a formalist poetics.

To get at what is most useful in Britton's thinking we thus need to move past what is best known. This will require us to look closely at
what I see as his unsuccessful attempt to link (and to restrict) writing in the spectator role to the forming of verbal objects — writing that is either art or which in some way resembles it. In doing so, I will focus here on Britton's recent summing up of his theory in "Viewpoints: The distinction between participant and spectator role language in research and practice" (1984). While this essay does mark some small shifts in his thinking on the functions, it is, on the whole, strikingly consistent with a line of inquiry that Britton has pursued for some 20 years now. It is useful, then, as a concise and recent account of his views. Whenever I can, though, I will also refer to Britton's prior phrasings of those views in the much fuller Development of writing abilities (1975).¹

The problem, simply put, is that in his theory Britton tries but is never fully able to merge two conflicting ways of looking at our uses of language. The first centers on the matter of role: I speak sometimes as a participant in the affairs of the world, using words to respond to events as they unfold around me, and at other times I am a spectator of those events, using words to comment and reflect on what occurs. The distinction is like that between work and play, between using language as a means to some practical end and simply enjoying it for the pleasure it brings (1975, pp. 79-81; 1984, p. 320). What is most important to note here, though, is that the participant/spectator split is a distinction based not on the features of texts, but on the stances that we can take toward texts — an emphasis aligning the work of Britton closely with that of transactional theorists like Louise Rosenblatt (1978).

The second way of looking at language concerns the function of a speech act or text. A verbal transaction helps us go about the business of life, and so works by being efficient and clear; it is organized according to the needs and interests of its audience. A verbal object invites us to reflect on events; it is organized not to provide information but to convey "an experience of order" (1975, p. 83; 1984, p. 322). Such a text must be read, then, not as a sequence of ideas and assertions which can be responded to separately, one after the other, but rather as a single linguistic construct. This emphasis on the unity and completeness of the text itself leads, inevitably, to the very sort of

¹ Still more of Britton's thinking on the functions can be found in Language and Learning (1970, pp. 97-125), "Functions of Writing" (1978), and many of the essays in Prospect and Retrospect (1982).
formalism that transactional views set out to oppose—brings us, actually, to something very like the well-wrought urns and verbal icons of the old New Criticism, as Louise Rosenblatt, in discussing her links and differences with Britton, has herself noted (1985, p. 102).

And indeed, until recently, Britton was content to use terms like literature (1963) or the poetic function (1975) to refer to what he now calls the verbal object. His shift to the present term marks an attempt, I think, to find a word whose range of meanings seems more readily to cover not only the work of the literary artist, but the artlike stories and gossip of “ordinary mortals and schoolchildren” (1984, p. 320) as well. But it is clear, though, that in speaking of a verbal object, Britton still has in mind either a work of art or something which in its freedom from the demands of practical, everyday discourse is much like one. And it is equally clear that he feels that one can tell such artlike discourse from more ordinary verbal transactions by looking at its form: “The verbal object in contrast aims at creating a unity that is . . . formally satisfying—an experience of order—a unity by virtue of the way all of its elements are appropriate to each other and to the whole” (1984, p. 322). We are left then, in effect, with a disappointingly familiar halving of discourse into ordinary language and poetry, composition and literature, verbal transaction and verbal object.

There are several points that can be made against any such splitting of “ordinary” and “poetic” discourse. One could argue, for instance, that poetic texts get written for much the same reasons that other, non-poetic ones do: that poems and novels, like essays and articles, are attempts to persuade their readers of certain views of the world—and thus that all texts are at heart rhetorical, transactional. What text could have a more openly practical and persuasive aim than Paradise lost? Or, conversely, one could argue that no text refers unambiguously to the world, that what is said is always influenced and constrained by the shape of its saying—and thus that no text is ever free of “poetic” elements. After all, any text is literally a verbal object, and there is nothing to keep an essay from being as carefully shaped and formed as a poem. What poet, indeed, could rest his work more delicately on the shifts and nuances of language than did the scientist Freud? In either case, the distinction between verbal transaction and verbal object begins to seem far less clear or useful.

Which is perhaps all for the good, for if the distinction between the two were really as sharp as Britton presents his case, then the result would be a rather odd either/or choice for the writer. For it would seem that one cannot move towards both ends of the continuum at
once — that one is given a choice between “on the one hand a verbal transaction and on the other a verbal object” (1984, p. 320) — and thus that the more a text is arranged to inform or persuade its reader, the less poetic it must become, and vice versa, that the more artlike a text is made, the less direct practical impact it can hold on its readers. (See also Britton et. al., 1979, pp. 30-31.) But surely a poetic interest in the form of one’s text need not preclude a desire to affect one’s reader. Rather, the letter home from college had better be well and subtly crafted if, as hoped, a check is to appear by the return mail, and a poem had better mean something if it is to stay in the mind of its reader for long. One can, indeed usually must, move towards both sides of the continuum at once.

My aim here, however, is not to go over such arguments yet again. The case against the “poetic fallacy” has been well made by the likes of Mary Louise Pratt (1977, pp. 3-37) and Terry Eagleton (1983, pp. 1-16), and Britton himself has noted that: “It is this “great divide’ [between verbal object and transaction] . . . that has aroused the most opposition to our ideas” (1984, p. 323). So rather than entering once more into a debate whose opposing sides are by now fixed and well-known, I would like to push on to the next step in the theory of the functions — where the problems raised by this “great divide” become clear in an immediate and practical way.

For the key move in Britton’s theory is his juxtaposing of the distinctions of role and function, arguing that “whenever we play the role of spectator of human affairs . . . we are in the position of literature” (1963, p. 37, cited in 1984, p. 325). It is this linking of role and function that seems to me most suspect in his theory. The connection between the participant role and the verbal transaction is easy enough to make, if rather trivial: to use language to get things done is by definition to participate in events. But the link between the spectator role and the verbal object is not nearly as plain, as Britton himself admits (1984, p. 324). His argument for connecting them goes as follows: Language allows us to operate in the world through the use of symbols. It enables us to form a “world schema,” a symbolic picturing of experience which we can then use to guide and mediate our further responses to events (1984, p. 324). But this ability to picture the world symbolically also opens up another sort of activity: “We can improvise upon our accumulated picture of the world without attempting or contemplating any overt activity, any outcome in our perceived behavior in the actual world” (1984, p. 324). Like literature, then, Britton argues, the spectator role allows us to stand back from the give and take of
events in order to attend to their patterning. It is, in essence, a theory-building rather than theory-using stance. As Britton puts it: “As participants we apply our value systems; as spectators we generate and refine the system itself” (1984, p. 326).

Such a view of the spectator is interesting and useful — particularly when applied to a system of schooling in which students are often asked to speak or write in order to parrot back what they have learned, but rarely to reflect on how they have learned it, or why it was valuable to do so. But what such an argument does not explain is why taking on the spectator role should put one uniquely “in the position of literature” — why it should only lead, that is, to the forming of verbal objects. For surely there are many instances of theorizing, of speculating, that do not result in artful or artlike texts: the scientist as she compares the possible ways of explaining her data, the historian as she constructs the meaning of the past, the philosopher as she evaluates the form of an argument — none of them use language so much to get things done as to rethink our ways of interpreting the world. They are spectators, not participants. But neither are they poets, gossips, or story-tellers. Rather, they are theorists whose work improvises “upon our accumulated picture of the world.” (Of course one might argue that since the purposes of such writings are, in the end, to reshape our understandings of the world, they are still in fact transactional. But what poem or story does not attempt the same? If any writing that tries to affect the ways we think and feel, to somehow alter our views of the world, is transactional, then surely almost all literature must be transactional.)

Let me be as clear as I can be: I agree with Britton that in reading or writing a poetic text, a verbal object, one takes on the role of a spectator. But I don’t think that we do so only in our dealings with the poetic. Rather, the act of stepping back, of theorizing, of gaining a critical distance from events and ideas, seems a vital part of how one learns any discipline, of how one enters into any form of talk or writing. Indeed, it would seem to be precisely this that gives the idea of the spectator role its power — particularly for the sorts of writing-across-the-curriculum efforts that have so often used the work of Britton as one of their starting points.

I find Britton’s response to such arguments curious. Rather than simply admitting that one can take on the role of the spectator in non-poetic discourse, he has instead suggested that a new “analytic-reflective” category be added under the heading of verbal transaction. This, he claims, would both account for those uses of “language to think something through for one’s own purposes, to solve a problem with
no further thought for anybody else,” and “distinguish this from the type of reflective activity typical of a verbal object” (1984, p. 328). What he fails to explain is how these two forms of reflective activity differ, and why it is so important to distinguish them. For if the defining aim of a verbal transaction is to get things done, to carry out the business of the world, then why should one go to such lengths to include speech or writing that has “no further thought for anybody else” as one?

The reason is, I think, that Britton is really only interested in the idea of the spectator role insofar as it supports a distinction between poetic and non-poetic discourse to which he is already committed. Since the “analytic-reflective” writings of the philosopher or critic are not, in his view, poetic, he is unwilling to grant that they may involve the taking on of the spectator role. The consequence of this refusal is the limiting of his theory’s usefulness and coherence.

My argument here is simple enough: it is not only mistaken but self-defeating to tie the idea of the spectator to the forming of verbal objects. Britton is clearly convinced, as I am as well, of the importance of the spectator role. But he mutes its usefulness by having it serve as merely a prop for a familiar and stale opposition between ordinary language and poetry, comp and lit. But what if we used it not to shore up such oppositions but to break them down?

Britton himself begins to do just this when he points out that we take on the role of the spectator not only in our dealings with fiction and poetry but in our gossip — our everyday chat about people and events — as well (1970, pp. 107-110; 1982, pp. 46-47). The force of this gesture is blunted, I think, by Britton’s insistence that works of art hold some mysterious unity of form that other texts lack, but it is still a needed step towards joining the workaday and aesthetic uses of language.

Even more useful, though, would be to define the spectator role so that it covers not only the stance of the artist (or the gossip) but all those sorts of activities that are at root speculative — in which we look at things, not for any immediate practical end, but for the sheer sake of seeing how they work, how they’re put together. Such a view might help us to link the theory-making of the scientist with the story-telling of the novelist, the philosopher’s ordering of ideas with the poet’s structuring of feeling. It could help us argue, too, that the taking on of the role of the spectator, the theorist, is not simply something one does in English class, but is instead a needed part of the study of all disciplines.
It is also a view supported by some of Britton's own research. In their 1975 schools study, Britton and his colleagues found not only that almost all of the writings done by older students were transactional, but that the writing tasks given those students were usually of the most mundane and low-level sort: records, reports, simple requests for information. There was, in most classes, as little call for writing of a speculative, theoretic, or critical sort as there was for the writing of poetry (1975, pp. 163-167). The problem in such classes was not that the students were not writing poems or stories, but that they were not really writing history or science or philosophy either. They were filling in blanks, taking exams, not writing to learn anything.

Redefining the spectator as theorist might help to suggest to some of our colleagues in the other disciplines just how all this talk about writing as a mode of learning might fit into what they and their students do. Scientists don't write poems but they do construct theories; historians don't write novels but they do weave narratives as a way of understanding the past. It's that sort of theorizing, speculating, interpreting, that we need to be talking about with our colleagues outside of English — because it's that kind of writing that the students in their classrooms need to be doing more of.

Such a broadened view of the spectator is also, I think, suggested by the work of the psychologist and critic D. W. Harding. Britton cites Harding often, and credits him with being the first theorist to note the links between gossip, the spectator role and our responses to art. But what Harding has to say about the spectator differs in some ways from Britton. In his 1937 essay on "The role of the onlooker," Harding defines not just two but four stances we can take towards events. The operative mode is close to that of Britton's participant. In it we are immersed in events, trying to get things done. In the intellectual mode, though, we no longer attempt to influence what we see but simply try to comprehend it, to figure out how things work. In the perceptual mode, we try neither to understand nor to influence, but instead simply look on — as a man resting on a hill, say, might take in the scenery without trying in the least to sort out or to remember what he sees. And, finally, in the role of the onlooker proper, we observe in order to evaluate, to comment on and refine our understanding of what we see (1937, pp. 247-249). Harding is most interested in this last role of the onlooker, which he sees as playing an essential part in how we form and reshape our views of the world, and which, like Britton, he ties closely to the sort of stance we assume in reading fiction or poetry. But Harding also points out that "the second and third of these modes
of response — comprehension and perceptual contemplation — may be regarded as a form of looking on” (1937, p. 250) — as distinct, that is, from the active give and take of the operative or participant mode. In doing so, he offers us a way of linking the intellectual and artist together as spectators.

But in reducing Harding's four categories to his own two, Britton does this: He throws out the perceptual mode, since it seems to have little to do with language, and then merges the operative and intellectual modes into the single role of the participant (1978, p. 18). In doing so, he gives up the chance to use the idea of the spectator to cut across the various cubbyholes of the disciplines, to suggest that a common practice of theory-making and speculating underlies them all. Where Harding had linked the intellectual and onlooker, Britton separates them. And so we are left with yet one more dividing-up of linguistic turf, as the spectator role is constricted to our dealings with the literary, and the participant role is stretched to accommodate almost everything else — from the musings of critics and philosophers to requests that the salt be passed.

Britton isolates our uses of language in the spectator role, identifies them with a special kind of poetic discourse, as a way, I think, of emphasizing their value. He is concerned, to put it another way, to insure that a certain space is kept in the curriculum for talk and writing in the spectator role. As he has written:

While everybody supports the importance of learning in its accepted sense — learning about the world, a participant role activity — there is no similar emphasis upon the kind of learning associated with reading and writing in the role of the spectator. To put that more widely, and more bluntly, we have failed to observe that neglect of the arts in our society is closely associated with . . . alienation (1984, p. 329).

But is a lack of activity in the spectator role really quite the same as a “neglect of the arts”? I would argue that it is much more. The problem with a science class that does not often ask the students in it to take on the role of spectators — to step back, that is, and re-evaluate, criticize and theorize about the things they are doing — is not that such a class neglects the arts, but that it neglects much of science. To restrict talk and writing in the spectator role to “the arts” is to underestimate its importance in how we go about learning almost anything.

Britton is right that the language of school is often alienating. But one reason why is that our uses of language are so commonly seen as discreet, specialized, unconnected. In such a view, there’s one kind of
language, the really important kind, that gets used as a Tool of Communication, employing Clarity and Structure and Logic, and that everybody needs to know how to use — and then there's that other kind, for feelings and stuff, that gets taught in English classes. Britton's distinction between verbal transaction and verbal object, between necessary and unnecessary forms of talk, plays right into this division. By identifying language in the spectator role as something specific to literature, to the forming of verbal objects, he in fact offers up a rationale for shunting almost all non-transactional writing to the side (or at least to the English class), as everybody else buckles down to the basics of exam and report writing instead. Thus his theory of the functions ends up reinforcing the very alienation it is meant to protest.

Several of the early readers of this essay have complained that I have overstated Britton's formalism, that in stressing the difficulties raised by his categories I have missed his larger intent as a theorist: "To find an everyday, informal counterpart for the specialized formal discourse we know as literature and so to create a link between what poets and novelists do and what ordinary mortals and schoolchildren can achieve" (1984, p. 322). Such readings miss my point here, however, which is that there are two conflicting strains in Britton's thought: One that is anti-formalist in spirit, and that does indeed seek to connect the writings of poets and schoolchildren through the idea of the spectator role; and another, modeled on the work of formalists like Jakobson and Langer, that reasserts the old distinction between ordinary and poetic language under the new names of verbal transaction and verbal object. The spectator role describes a stance one can take toward a text or experience. The verbal object defines a special kind of text. The two are not necessarily connected. Rather, I have tried to show here that the idea of the spectator role may prove more useful if it is not tied solely to the reading and writing of verbal objects. It is, ironically, Britton's belief that literature (the verbal object) is a special kind of discourse that keeps him from claiming all that he might for the importance of the spectator role. To abandon the distinction between verbal object and transaction would only add to the scope of the rest of this theory.

What I am arguing for, then, is a broader (and perhaps more disruptive) view of the spectator as theorist — for a view that allows us to see the scientist as doing something more than simply shuffling data around in his writing, and that lets us look at the story-making of the artist as something bound up intimately with, not separate from, our other attempts to name and understand the world. We need not
to further oppose the transactional and the poetic, but to find ways of showing their connectedness. Perhaps more than anyone else, James Britton has helped us to see the interweaving of language and learning, stories and thinking. It is that insight — and not the categories and oppositions set up by the functions — that we ought to build on.

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