Isis Lecture

I'm going to talk about culture this afternoon, in the widest sense; about education and the arts, especially literature. It's my contention that something has gone bad, something has gone wrong in the state of education, and that we can see this very clearly in the way schools deal with books, and reading, and writing – with everything that has to do with literature, and the making of it. When more and more good teachers are leaving the profession in disillusion and disappointment; when the most able undergraduates are taking one look at a career in teaching, and deciding that it offers no scope for their talents, and turning away to do something else; when school headships are proving harder and harder to fill – then we're doing something wrong.

I think it boils down to this: that education now is suffused with the wrong emotion. Somehow, over the past quarter of a century, ever since James Callaghan's famous Great Debate speech, we have seen confidence leaking away, and something else slowly seeping in to take its place. What that something else is, I shall come to near the end. No doubt some of the confidence was misplaced; no doubt we needed a Great Debate. But I think the benefits that came from it have long since been exhausted. It's time for another way of doing things.

So first of all, I'm going to look at what's happening now, and I'm going right in to the glowing, radioactive core at the heart of the engine that drives the whole thing: the National Curriculum and the SATs. I won't spend too long on these things, but we do need to look at the actual stuff to get a flavour of the thought behind it, and this is what the Qualifications Curriculum Authority says about the Reading part of the English tests at Key Stage 2 – that means, in human language, at age 11.

They think that reading consists of using a range of strategies to decode, selecting, retrieving, deducing, inferring, interpreting, identifying and commenting on the structure and organisation of texts, identifying and commenting on the writer's purposes and viewpoints, relating texts to the social, cultural and historical contexts.

That's it. That's all. Nothing else. That's what they want children of 11 to do when they read. They don't seem to know that reading can

also be enjoyed, because enjoyment just doesn't feature in the list of things you have to do.

Mind you, it's just as well that they don't have to enjoy it, because they're not likely to have a copy of the books anyway. In another unit of work – 46 pages, to get through in a fortnight – they are to study Narrative Structure. The work's built around two short stories and part of a novel. It's not expected – this is interesting – that the children will have their own copies of the complete texts, though some pages may be extracted and photocopied.

But the whole book doesn't matter very much either, because books exist in order to be taken apart and laid out in pieces like Lego. One of the things the children have to do in this unit of work is to make a class list of "the features of a good story opening." This is where it stops being merely tedious, and starts being mendacious as well. The teacher is asked to model the writing of an alternative first paragraph for one of the stories. The instructions say "Read through the finished writing together. Check this against the criteria for a good opening – does it fulfil all of these?"

I can't say it clearly enough: this is not how it works. Writing doesn't happen like this. What does happen like this is those Hollywood story-structure courses, where there are seven rules for this, and five principles of that, and eight bullet-points to check when constructing the second-act climax. You cannot write a good story by building up a list of effective openings. It is telling children a lie to say that this is the way you write stories. Apart from anything else, it's profoundly vulgar.

Then there is the Reading Journal, which children have to keep. Among other things, they have to:

List the words and phrases used to create an atmosphere

Write a fifty word summary of a whole plot

Pick a descriptive word from the text and, using a thesaurus, write down five synonyms and antonyms for that word

And so on. What concerns me here is the relationship this sets up between child and book, between children and stories. Stories are written to beguile, to entertain, to amuse, to move, to enchant, to horrify, to delight, to anger, to make us wonder. They are not writ-

ten so that we can make a fifty word summary of the whole plot, or find five synonyms for the descriptive words. That sort of thing would make you hate reading, and turn away from such a futile activity with disgust. In the words of Ruskin, it's "slaves' work, unredeemed."

Those who design this sort of thing seem to have completely forgotten the true purpose of literature, the everyday, humble, generous intention that lies behind every book, every story, every poem: to delight or to console, to help us enjoy life or endure it. That's the true reason we should be giving books to children. The false reason is to make them analyse, review, comment and so on.

But they have to do it – day in, day out, hour after hour, this wretched system nags and pesters and buzzes at them, like a great bluebottle laden with pestilence. And then all the children have to do a test; and that's when things get worse.

The danger of looking for results of the wrong sort

The danger of tests and league tables and so on is that they demand clear, unequivocal, one-dimensional results. In order to give the sort of result that can be tabulated and measured, they force every kind of response to a piece of writing through a sort of coarse-grained mesh so that it comes out black or white, on or off, yes or no, this or that. In a multiple-choice test there's no provision to say both, or all of them sometimes but mostly this, or this today but that yesterday and who knows what tomorrow, and not at all something else quite different from any of these, and certainly not ever I love this. It made my heart turn over, I was so happy when I read it.

Here's the truth about how children respond to literature. It comes from a book by a great teacher and storyteller called Marie L. Shedlock. She said this:

"My experience, in the first place, has taught me that a child very seldom gives out any account of a deep impression made upon him: it is too sacred and personal. But he very soon learns to know what is expected of him, and he keeps a set of stock sentences which he has found out are acceptable to the teacher. How can we possibly gauge the deep effects of a story this way ... ? Then again," she goes on, "why are we in such a hurry to find out what effects have been produced by our stories? Does it matter whether we know today or

tomorrow how much a child has understood? For my part, so sure do I feel of the effect that I am willing to wait indefinitely."

Incidentally, that doesn't come from the 1960s; it was from a book called The Art of the Storyteller, published in 1915.

There is no human purpose in this incessant, frenzied testing at all. The children who are supposed to be at the heart of the educational process are turned into little twitching cells of response, like the nerve in the leg of Galvani's famous frog. That's all they have to do: to twitch or kick appropriately. Nothing else matters. The depth of their lives, the richness and complexity of their emotions, the trouble and difficulty, the love and the hope and the fear and the exhilaration and the joy of being alive and conscious, all that is irrelevant. It's cut off and thrown away. All we want is the little kicking twitching frog's leg. If enough of them kick this box, then the school will go up in the league tables, to universal applause – what a good school! What dedicated teachers! What a wise and far-seeing education system we have! If too many little twitching frogs' legs kick that box, then the school will go down, to universal condemnation: useless teachers; feeble leadership; name them and shame them.

Testing and league tables are a coarse way of dealing with learning, but they're not only coarse; they're a stupid way of assessing human achievement, but they're not only stupid; they're a cruel way of dealing with children, but they're not only cruel. You can be coarse and stupid and cruel carelessly, ignorantly, without realising what you're doing, and when it's pointed out you can see your mistake, and do things in a better way. But there's a willed quality to this. Plenty of clever and well-qualified people have sat down and worked this out deliberately. Plenty of commentators in the press have jeered at those who criticise it. Plenty of ignorant politicians have hitched their opportunistic wagons to tests and SATs and league tables, aware of nothing but the way things were going, and eager to be going in the same direction, leading from behind as usual. All of those people wanted things to be like this.

And meanwhile, they miss what is going on when a child writes a story.

Fishing at night

They miss it because they don't know how anyone writes a story. They think that the way to write a story is to spend fifteen minutes planning, and, by the way, fill in the planning format to show that you've planned it properly; and then spend forty-five minutes writing the story according to your plan; and then you've done it.

That doesn't feel to me like the way to write a story. Writing a story feels to me like fishing in a boat at night. The sea is much bigger than you are, and the light of your little lamp doesn't show you very much of it. You hope it'll attract some curious fish, but perhaps you'll sit here all night long and not get a bite.

And all around you is silence. And plenty of time. You're in a calm state of mind, not asleep, not at all sleepy, but calm and relaxed and attentive: not the sort of heavy stupor you fall into after several hours' television, but the sort of unharassed awareness that we achieve when we're truly absorbed. True calm intense relaxed attention.

Are you going to find a fish? Well, there are things you can do to improve your chances: with every voyage you learn a little more about the bait these fish like; and you're practised enough to wait for a twitch on the line and not snatch at it too soon; and you've discovered that there are some areas empty of fish, and others where they are plentiful.

But there's a lot you can't predict. Sometimes you'll feel a tug on the line and pull in nothing but seaweed; sometimes a cunning fish will flicker at the hook for a moment and disappear, with the bait in its mouth and the hook left bare in the water; sometimes a great fish will swim round and round, close enough to touch, and then with a flick of a tail plunge down into the deeps and vanish without touching your poor bait at all.

And the sea is very big, and the weather is changeable, and you really have only the most rudimentary knowledge of what things lie in the depths. There might be monsters there that could swallow hook, and line, and lamp, and boat, and you. These powers are not interested in any rationally-worked-out plans concocted far away on shore; none of the fish are interested in plans, or reason; the fears and delights of fishing at night have nothing to do with rationality.

So you set off in your little boat, your little craft of habit and intention and hope, and bait your hook, and drop it in the water, and sit

and wait, calm and relaxed and aware of every ripple, every faint swirl of phosphorescence, every twitch on the line, until …

That's what it feels like to me, and that's only the beginning. There are many other things to learn later on. But if it doesn't start like this, it won't be worth doing at all. Doing it like this means taking it seriously as work. It means that this is something worth doing. It means that when you've finished, you'll have something valuable to show for it. If I saw a child working like that, and I have done, I'd take them seriously as a fellow-craftsman, and we'd be able to talk as equals. And we have done that too.

And we could both laugh at the absurdity, the fatuity, of saying "Plan your story for fifteen minutes and write it for forty-five." Bone-headed pieces of idiocy like that are spoken by those who have never left the shore, who know nothing about the pleasures and the perils of the sea, and who have the gall, the brazen conceit, to think they can tell us how to catch fish at night.

Children's writing

Of all the things I did and failed to do when I was a teacher, the things I'm least ashamed of are the occasions when, for some reason, a child in my class discovered that he or she could catch a fish like that; could take a risk and write something true and meaningful. I remember a boy of 12 who was difficult and uncommunicative, but who responded when I encouraged him to write about the family's greyhounds. I told him to take his time, not to fret about it, but to talk to the page as if he was talking to me; and over half a term the most wonderful piece of writing emerged, full of knowledge and love and a vivid ability to convey it.

Then there were the two girls of 13 who wrote each other's biographies. Again, no pressure, no hurry: they could do what proper writers do, and let the work emerge at its own pace. They were best friends, these two, and they wrote about how they used to go on holiday together, and how they chased boys, and how they argued and broke up, and how their friendship fell apart; and then how the little brother of one of them died, and that experience drew them together again, and now they couldn't imagine ever having hated each other as they once did so bitterly.

And working at that writing showed the children very vividly first, that you could use language to say true things, important things; second, that what you wrote could affect other people, could move them, could make them think – it affected me; and third, that you could take time to work at your writing and learn to say things more clearly and vividly.

But this can only happen when teacher and pupil – school and pupil, the system and the child – are on the same side, so to speak; when the relationship is more like writer and editor, or craftsman and apprentice, and when the aim is not to pass a test but to produce something of true value, no matter how long it takes. A wise editor will always let a book take its own time, and won't nag and pester the author to hurry up. But as we know, these days editors are lower in the hierarchy of publishing than accountants, and teachers are less important than those who set the tests. We have let the wrong people take charge.

Parity

I want to move on now to talk about something I call parity.

I think there has to be a sort of match, a sort of equality of opportunity between producers and audience when it comes to art, or the experience of it will be depressive and excluding instead of uplifting and inclusive. What I mean is that the audience (readers, or whatever) have to feel that this is a game or a process or a craft or an activity that they themselves could take part in too, if they wanted to. If they don't want to, fair enough; they can just enjoy it. But if they do want to take part, then they need to feel that there's nothing to stop them. I don't mean it should be easy: nothing worth doing is easy, and children know that as well as grown-ups do; I just mean it shouldn't be impossible.

Writing has the kind of parity I mean. To write a book, all you need is a pen and paper. If you'd rather write with a keyboard, computers are easy enough to come by, and most people have access to one; and if you prefer an old-fashioned typewriter, you can still get hold of those.

And that's it. That's all you need. Pen and paper, computer or typewriter, is all Dickens and Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë had, all Nick Hornby or J.K.Rowling or Ian McEwan have, and once you've

got them, you can write a book. When we do start to write we soon discover that it's very hard work, and that our talent is by no means as gigantic as we thought it was before we set it to work; but that very discovery gives us a measure of what we can do and what others can do with the same means, and of how far we've got to go, and tells us more about the game we're in.

This is what children can feel – are entitled to feel – when they write stories or poems.

The same thing is true of music. My fumbling hesitant attempts to sing and play the guitar occupied many happy hours of my teenage years, because I felt that even though he was better at it than I was, I was in the same game as Bob Dylan. At least, I was until my home-made harmonica holder fell apart during a passionate performance of The Times They Are A-Changing in the Seashell Café in Criccieth.

I wasn't, though – and this is the point I want to stress – I wasn't in the same game as the Amadeus Quartet or the London Symphony Orchestra, though I would have liked to be, because at my school there was no school orchestra and no instrumental tuition. There was a very fine choir – this was Wales – but the only time we saw a live performance of classical music was when the Bangor Trio paid one of its rare visits. There was no parity. When – too late for me – instrumental tuition became more common in schools, when there were peripatetic music teachers going around the counties teaching the trumpet and the violin and the flute, children like me were able to feel that they were in the same game as the great players of classical music. And a very good thing too.

The trouble is that parity can break down very easily. Even when we take the relentless and inhuman pressure of the tests out of the equation, the children aren't always in the same game. One clear and obvious fact – too large to see, you might say, like the famous ship that just wasn't seen by the natives of Tierra del Fuego, although they saw the rowing boat the sailors came ashore in – one huge and salient fact about children and narrative is this: the vast bulk of their experience of story has come to them not in the form of words on the page but in the form of events on a screen. Television drama, in other words. Children are very good indeed at reproducing this, with all its characteristics: they are very good indeed at writing dialogue, and comparatively weak at writing narrative. Why? Because the only language the screen models for them is dia-

logue. If you have characters moving and speaking on the screen of your mind, you can write down the things they say, because they say them in words, but you can't so easily write down the things they do, because you have to find the words yourself. The screen doesn't provide them. Consequently, young writers are very good at dialogue, and very good too at moving swiftly from one scene to another, cutting with rapidity and skill in the way that screen drama does; but they don't know how to indicate it on the page, and I've heard teachers lamenting that the story is all over the place and has no form or structure, entirely failing to recognise the form and structure it does have. Teacher and child are working at cross-purposes; they're not in the same game.

Being cut off

But it's not only a current game that many children are cut off from: they're cut off from a great deal of the past as well. For reasons I've never understood, we in this country have allowed the cultural-heritage argument to be won by the most conservative and reactionary voices around. We should win it back, and not be tempted to utter any cant about middle-class values or élitism, either. Jonathan Rose's magnificent book The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes ought to put a stop to that nonsense. No-one who reads that would ever again dare to bleat about high culture being élitist. No, we must reclaim the best for everyone. If we don't, we are cut off from the past; we're exiled from the most valuable things we can know; we're in a sort of temporal refugee camp, living on scraps and hand-outs.

Here's an example of the sort of thing I mean: a couple of years ago I was at a conference where one of the evening entertainments was provided by a young poet whom I didn't know, but who was apparently well thought of. The poems he read were well-intentioned, but clumsy, obvious, poorly expressed, and when he wasn't being comic, he was being sentimental. In short, his work wasn't very good. I was curious, and afterwards I asked him what poetry he liked, what he read, which poets he admired. He thought for a moment and came up with the names of a couple of popular present-day figures. – Why was that? He liked them because they were funny. – Did he know any poetry by heart? No, he didn't. – Did he read any poetry

from the past, from previous centuries? Oh, no, he didn't like that boring old-fashioned stuff. It was all difficult to read, it was all fancy words and thees and thous, it didn't make sense any more.

And I wondered why it was that no-one had ever helped that young man to understand his own craft. He thought poetry was either boring old-fashioned stuff that no-one could understand, or simple funny stuff that anyone could understand at once. Why had he never been helped to see poetry not as either of those things, but as something else altogether: as enchantment? As magic? Why had no-one worked a spell with him, letting him taste the potency of Kubla Khan, or La Belle Dame Sans Merci, or William Blake's The Tyger, or Tennyson's The splendour falls on castle walls, or the old ballad of Sir Patrick Spens, or dozens, scores, hundreds of others? Why had no-one told him that you don't need to understand it at first; that you can just taste the words in your mouth, that you can just hear the sounds they make, and relish the music, and feel the rhythm, get it in your body, in the muscles, in the nerves, feel yourself transported and drunk and fifty times more alive than you were an hour before? Why had no-one explained that these old men and women with their wigs and their formal dress were not just dead figures in a museum of pompous behaviour, but fellow-craftsmen, fellow-workers, struggling to make a living, trying to remain true to the voice in their heads, working with the same materials and the same tools as the ones he worked with, fired by the same excitements, consoled by the same hopes, moved to tears by the same sorrows? And more: that they were living still, that they were enchanters and sorcerers with the power to call down spirits from the empty air and raise the dead from their graves?

And that this was his own inheritance. This was what he could claim by right. This was the whole rich, teeming, living world he was heir to; he had a thousand years to draw on, and he knew nothing of it, because no-one had helped him see it. Those who were in a position to show him had been afraid of being thought old-fashioned, or afraid of boring him, or afraid of challenging him to try something unfamiliar; and with the sun and the moon and the stars blazing above him, he had his eyes firmly shut, stumbling from place to place in the dark.

Self-respect

One reason that this takes place is perhaps too much emphasis on self-esteem, and not enough on self-respect. (If you want to know the difference, self-respect is that quality which prevents you from talking about your self-esteem). In a very interesting extract from his new book *Respect*, which was printed in the Guardian in January, the sociologist Richard Sennett uses the analogy of music:

"The craft-work involved in learning music seems to illuminate how self-respect develops ... Skill breeds self-respect when difficulties are mastered, not when something comes easily ... The resistance matters as much as the mastery ... The more a music student pursues playing correctly in tune or in time, rather than wallowing and emoting, the more his expressive craft develops. This is secure self-respect, this capacity to engage in something for its own sake."

That's the point, isn't it? As I said earlier – and I can't stress this strongly enough – what we do ourselves, what we ask children to do, must be worth doing. Writing a sonnet is hard, but worth doing; copying five synonyms out of a thesaurus is easy, but worthless. Out of an exaggerated tenderness, out of a genuine concern that children should not feel hurt by failure, we have kept them away from real challenges. We're not letting them play the same game as the great players, even when they could. We're destroying the parity.

Tigers

One thing that has a bearing on all of this is the cast of mind that's encouraged by this system – the attitudes that are going to inform the work of the next generation of teachers.

I sometimes think that we let people go into teaching too young. I wonder how much use you're going to be to a school if the only things you know are ... things you learned in school. The culture of exam after exam, test after test, with a curriculum like the deadly upas-tree that casts a blight over every corner of a child's school life, cannot possibly encourage the kind of openness of mind, the intellectual curiosity which the best teachers have to have.

Instead I fear it will bring up a generation who are kind, who love children, who are full of good intentions; but who have been discouraged from intellectual adventurousness. Who are not interested in how things came about. Who are not mental explorers. Who are timid when it comes to offering opinions; who don't want to stand

out or offend; who would rather talk about what was on TV last night than about real deep questions of right and wrong or purpose and meaning and truth, because they feel it might even be slightly improper to express themselves on the subject. An intellectual challenge is something a little indecent, almost a personal insult. After all, everyone's entitled to their opinion; if that's what you feel, then that is right for you; we shouldn't try to impose our views on anyone else; the most important thing is what you're comfortable with feeling. If you think John Grisham is as good as Charles Dickens, then that belief is right for you.

Those are things I've heard student teachers say. Those are the values they've been encouraged to absorb and maintain. The generosity and kindness of young people like this is undeniable. You could warm your hands on their good intentions. But after a period in their company you long for an astringency of mind, a sharpness of perception, a quickness of wit, an ability to make unusual connections, a well-stocked memory, and a range of reference that goes back further than their own childhood. And curiosity, above all.

Of course, these are faults that time can cure. By far the most interesting and rewarding students I ever taught were mature people who'd grown up and had families and lived a bit: they had things to say, and they weren't afraid to say them, because they had some experience of the world.

But if a young person who is genuinely bright and talented does enter the teaching profession, how do they get on? What happens is that they soon find themselves ground down by the incessant form-filling and the relentless testing and inspecting, and hamstrung by the sheer lack of trust and lack of autonomy that is now the rule in schools. Imagine someone bright, and full of intellectual vigour, and on fire with a passion for learning and a real talent for communicating this passion – and then ask why such a person should have to be told what to do every minute of the day? Why they have to be inspected and nagged and examined all the time? Why they should be turned into mere delivery systems, administering a curriculum and following lesson-plans that are exactly the same as the ones every other teacher is following?

It's not as though we haven't been told this before. We were told almost exactly this a hundred and fifty years ago, in Ruskin's The Stones of Venice. How does this apply to the way we treat teachers

now, and to what we expect of them? “Above all, in our dealings with the souls of other men, we are to take care how we check, by severe requirement or narrow caution, efforts which might otherwise lead to a noble issue … You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both.”

So said Ruskin in 1853. Again, we didn’t listen. Ruskin went on to point out that when you do trust people to act for themselves, they are free to make mistakes, to blunder and fail; but there is the possibility of majesty too. Do we want human beings teaching our children, with all their faults and follies and limitations, but with all their depth and grandeur as well? Or do we want managers, who are glib and fluent in the language of audits and targets and performance indicators and mission statements, but who are baffled by true originality, who flinch and draw back from it as if it were deadly poison?

The extraordinary thing is that they are the same people. They could all be free, if they chose. Some of the young people who come into teaching may be timid and narrow-minded, but don’t think for a moment that I think that they’re not capable of courage and curiosity. They’ve never had a chance to show it; their teachers are afraid themselves. Marilyn Mottram of the University of Central England in Birmingham, who has been studying the way the National Curriculum and the Literacy Strategy work in schools, wrote to me last month: “When I work with teachers on developing ways of using texts I’m frequently asked ‘… but are we allowed to do that?’ This sort of continuing anxiety about literacy teaching,” she goes on, “suggests that a culture of conformity has been quite securely established among our primary teachers and, like many others, I find this deeply disturbing.”

These young people are tigers born in cages, and kept caged until they think that being caged is a natural condition; and they look down at themselves, and they see their magnificent stripes, and the only way they can understand them is to think that they themselves must be made of bars: they are their own cage; they dare not move outside the little space they occupy. But they are tigers still, if only they knew.

Teaching as telling stories

I'm coming towards the end of what I'm going to say, but I have a couple of things yet to deal with, and one of them is this.

The world is full of things that need to be explained to the young. The people best qualified to do this are those who are no longer young themselves, those who have acquired some knowledge or experience, and who have something valuable to pass on. I have no patience with the idea that children will discover anything and everything if left to themselves; as a matter of fact, I never met anyone who did hold that idea, though teachers were accused of believing it wholesale during the sixties and seventies.

Nevertheless, a sort of uneasiness, a sort of guilt hung around the idea of us knowing more than them and dealing out knowledge from on high. There was the feeling that instruction was somehow morally equivalent to propaganda, and had to be regarded with suspicion. This feeling took the form of, for instance, disapproving of narrative history and approving instead of investigations into issues, or examinations of primary sources, or attempts to empathise with the life of a Roman slave. That was OK, morally speaking, because there was no central directing consciousness at work, embodying top-down authoritarian patriarchal values – I know, you don't; I speak, you listen; I decide, you perform – and so on; and authoritarian patriarchal values were bad because they marginalised other points of view, other ranges of experience, especially those from figures such as women, slaves, minority ethnic groups, the working class, etc. You know that sort of argument.

Well, one doesn't want to be patriarchal, authoritarian, imperialist, etc, perish the thought; but this question has always interested me from a storytelling point of view, because the rejection of the central directing consciousness, of the omniscient narrator, is exactly what happened to literary fiction in the twentieth century, to its eventual impoverishment. Novelists became fascinated by other things than telling stories, and in the process, the feeling seemed to grow that there was something wrong about telling a story from a single, central directing consciousness, because that act involved a narrative voice, and narrators were now notoriously unreliable. So more and more literary fiction became tentative, diffident, uncertain, openly self-contradictory, uncommitted, shifting, relative ... and story, which is both events and the voice that tells us about them, was banished.

Where story went was into genre fiction – crime, romance, fantasy, and so on; and into children's books. And, incidentally, and increasingly, into non-fiction. You couldn't kill it; it's too healthy for that, and people have an insatiable appetite for knowing what happened next.

I think it's a healthy appetite, and it needs to be fed, so I want to champion teaching as telling stories: I think we should bring back story-telling into our classrooms, and do it at once. And I mean all kinds of stories: not just that every teacher should have a repertoire of fairy tales or ghost stories that they can bring out on a wet Friday afternoon, or when the video breaks down on a field study weekend – though I do mean that, and in spades; but true stories about historical events, about music and musicians, about engineers and engineering, about archaeology, about science, about the theatre, about politics, about exploration, about art – in fact stories about every kind of human activity. The sort of thing I mean is what Richard Dawkins does so well; and what Simon Schama does in the field of history; and what is done brilliantly in a book being discussed later this evening at the Festival, William Fiennes's The Snow Geese; or, in fact, what any human beings can do who have lived and thought about their lives and about the things that mean most to them.

And when you're telling a story, you need to let the story take its own time. Never mind these programmes and units and key stages; to hell with them. If the children want to go on listening, then go on telling.

And when you come to the end of the story, stop. Turn away from it. Let it do its own work in its own time; don't tear it into rags by making the poor children analyse, and comment, and compare, and interpret. Good God, the world is full of stories, full of true nourishment for the heart and the mind and the imagination; and this true nourishment is lying all around our children, untouched, and they're being force-fed on ashes and sawdust and potato-peelings.

Fear

So, almost at the end of this lecture, I come back to the thing I mentioned at the beginning, the wrong emotion, the thing that's been

gradually seeping into the system to replace the confidence that has drained away.

I'm talking about fear. I'm talking about chronic anxiety, uncertainty, apprehension; it's nothing so bracing as alarm, it's not the sort of thing to make us stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood; this is more like a sort of low-level dread, with a quality like those disturbing sounds, almost below the threshold where you can hear them at all, but perceptible to some part of your mind, or perhaps to your body, so that you're anxious but you don't know why, or you're uneasy but you can't see a reason for it, or you feel faintly but permanently sick; it's not bad enough to disable you, but it drains your energy, and it won't go away, and in the end it begins to feel like part of the eternal condition of the world; and you come to think that life will consist of feeling sick until you die.

In education now, anxiety is everywhere.

It's the government's fear of the electorate: "We can't fund small class sizes for every school, although we know that they would make the biggest difference of all, because we dare not put up taxes."

It's the civil servant's fear of losing control: "We dare not abandon this great juggernaut of authority, because then we would have no function."

It's the minister's fear of the press: "I dare not argue for greater educational freedom, because I'm terrified of the Daily Mail."

It's the newspapers' fear of the teaching profession: "We dare not trust the teachers. They are evil, politically motivated men and women, who, without iron control and constant supervision, would corrupt our children in a hundred different ways."

It's the young teacher's fear of boring the class: "I dare not read them a poem they might not immediately understand."

It's the older teacher's fear of putting the plan aside and trying something new: "Are we allowed to do this?"

It's the head teacher's fear of the league tables: "I dare not let that class take part in a theatre workshop, because never mind what else they get out of it, their test results might suffer. I dare not let the school slip down the league."

It’s the children’s fear of the SATs; it’s the whole staff’s fear of the Ofsted inspection.

It’s the adult’s fear of making a challenge: “I dare not ask this child to do something difficult, in case she’s permanently damaged by her failure to do it at once.”

It’s the fear of silence and stillness and patience: “We must have results now! We cannot wait to see how these children will grow up! Interrogate them all! We must know at once!”

It’s the fear of enchantment: “I dare not let go of my rationality; I must have explanations for everything; I must switch on a neon light in every corner; wonder is a delusion, enchantment is a trap, mystery is full of threat.”

When I started teaching thirty years ago, there was a culture of confidence in schools. It’s not there any more; it’s been replaced by a culture of fear. Shame on us, to be so timid. Shame on us, to be so mistrustful. Shame on us, to have so little faith in literature, in poetry and drama and story.

We can’t go back; no-one can ever go back. We can only go forward. We would not choose to start from here, if we had the choice, but we haven’t; and we cannot make a single great leap, we can only move in small separate steps.

So here are five steps we should take, starting right now.

> Do away with these incessant tests; they only tell you things you don’t need to know, and make the children do things they don’t need to do.
>
> Abolish the league tables, which are an abomination.
>
> Cut class sizes in every school in the country. No child should ever be in a class bigger than twenty.
>
> Make teaching a profession that the most gifted, the most imaginative, the most well-informed people will clamour to join; and make the job so rewarding that none of them will want to stop teaching until they drop.
>
> Make this the golden rule, the equivalent of the Hippocratic oath: Everything we ask a child to do should be something intrinsically worth doing.

If we do those five things, we will not bring about a golden age, or an earthly paradise; there are more things wrong with the world than we can cure by changing a system of schooling. But if we get education right, it would show that we were being serious about living and thinking and understanding ourselves; it would show that we were paying our children the compliment of assuming that they were serious too; and it would acknowledge that the path to true learning begins nowhere else but in delight, and the words on the signpost say: “Once upon a time …”

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