

Participant and Spectator

James Britton

Editor's note: Of James Britton's numerous insights in Language and Learning, none seems more important to teachers of writers at all levels than his distinction between people's use of language as **participants** and **spectators** in the affairs of living. In the following excerpt from his book, Britton describes the distinction between these two uses of language. Later in this issue, Edith Croake relates Britton's distinction between **participant** and **spectator** language use to his corresponding distinctions between **transactional**, **expressive**, and **poetic** modes of speaking and writing. (Useful definitions of Britton's modes appear in Toby Fulwiler's article on p. 17). The significance of these distinctions to every assignment we make as teachers of writing is immeasurable.

Because James Britton's book Language and Learning has recently become available in the United States through Hayden Publishing Co., Inc., I am especially pleased to introduce Britton's valuable insights to

readers for whom they are new and to review them for those for whom they are already familiar.

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James Britton

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From time to time a friend and neighbor of mine catches the same train as I do in the morning. We meet on the platform and the whole body of past experience of each of us offers to each of us a vast area from which to choose a topic to start the conversation. Since neither of us is a complete bore, we shall not choose what currently preoccupies us unless it happens to be something that would be likely to interest the other. Initial silence probably indicates that our individual preoccupations were not in an area of common interest. In that case we are likely to cast our minds back to the last time we met: as a result of this, he may say to me, 'How did your date with X go? Did you find him in the end?' and I shall then embark on the story of my meeting with X, perhaps bringing out all the difficulties and frustrations I had in tracking him down. If it is anything of a **cause celebre** for me I may have told the story often enough before to other people, but tell it again with relish and feel better for having done so. Further, as I retell it, I may find I have altered my perspective on it a little and especially so if, as I relate it for this particular listener, my relations with him and my conception of the sort of person he is, influence me in the way I construe it. As I finish my story and we arrive at our destination, that altered perspective, that new construction of the event, might constitute what any recording angel would have to record as the outcome of my narration and my encounter with a neighbour.

On the other hand, we can suppose a different situation with a different outcome. Suppose I have failed to track down X and am still concerned to do so: and that I therefore recount all my frustrated endeavours as a deliberate way of working up to saying, 'Well look, you've been in touch with X more recently than I have. Do you think you can do anything to help me?' Tracking down X is my concern, it is something I want to get done, and in narrating my past experience in this case I am using language in an attempt to 'get things done'. As a member of the human race I could claim that my concerns are a part of the world's concerns and that in pursuing them I am participating in the world's affairs. (It is helpful to think in this conglomerate way of 'the world's

affairs' in order to distinguish in general between getting things done and its converse--in spite of the anomaly that ten people trying to grab a single seat in the train must be seen as all participating in the world's affairs!)

In the first hypothetical case, on the other hand--that is, when I recount how I did see X--whether or not I find a new perspective in the telling, I tell the story for the pleasure of it. I go back over the experience, not in any way to get things done, not participating in my own and the world's affairs, but as a mere **spectator**. Moreover, in offering the story for my friend's enjoyment, I am inviting him to be a spectator of my past experiences.

This last observation extends the area of application of the distinction beyond the one I started with. If someone listening to me takes up the role of spectator of my experiences (just as, in agreeing to help me make contact with X he would be **participating** in that particular experience) then I am similarly in the role of spectator of **other people's** experience when I tell the story of how my grandfather, with thousands of others once watched for the appearance of a notorious 'ghost' on the banks of the Trent, or of how Columbus discovered America, or Newton sat under an apple tree.

But not so fast. Imagine a party--and the party is over: you and your fellow-hosts sit around discussing the behaviour of your guests in order to deduce who it might have been that left a ring by the wash-basin. This is helpful--it is part of the world's work, it is being useful to somebody. But you would probably find that the conversation soon drifts from the participant to the spectator role: you begin discussing the behaviour of your guests in order to **enjoy** it in a way you could not while they were still behaving. This is not useful--but it is very enjoyable. Most groups that have undertaken any joint enterprise--producing a play for example--will be familiar with the quite characteristic kind of pleasure they derive from going over it all when the enterprise is finished. In talk like this after the last performance, even the gross blunders and ensuing panics, looked back on, are tremendously entertaining.

On such occasions, the members of the group take up jointly the role of spectators of their common experience. In going back over it, as we have already noticed (p. 19), they enjoy it, savour it, interpret it. Indeed it seems to be part of the nature of man's experience that both in prospect and in retrospect he can respond to the quality of events in a way he is unable to do at the time of their happening. Some people particularly seem to measure out their lives in remembered rather than ongoing occasions. Perhaps this is a part of what Piaget meant when he said that the sharpest division to be made in experience is that which divides the whole of what has led up to a moment from that moment of experience itself.

The distinction we are making between participant and spectator roles can now be further extended to cover prospect as well as retrospect. I may take up the role of spectator of my own future as well as my own past. Day-dreaming is a common form in which to do so. If I **plan** a future event, on the other hand--say a camping holiday--then I am in the role of participant: if I talk to you about the coming event, in order to find out what you know about good sites or good routes or in order to borrow a Primus stove from you, then I am bringing you in as a participant. But if I relax and describe how marvellous I think it will be to lie in the shade of pine trees on the edge of the sunburnt beach--then we are both in the role of spectators of my future. Part of your pleasure may arise from anticipating with me the delights in store for me, but no doubt--since the pleasure of such day-dreaming is in any case not very closely related to the probability of realization--you will change the roles from time to time and see yourself in the centre of the picture.

This leads us to the final extension of the area of application: if I may take up the role of spectator of my own past or future experiences, of other people's experiences, past or future, then I may also become spectator of events that have never happened and could never happen. I do so, in fact, whenever I read--or hear or tell or write--a fairy story or its adult equivalent. The satisfaction I have in the story is the kind of satisfaction I

derive, not from having an experience, but from looking back on one I **have had**: it is as though I were to go back over an experience I have **not** had!

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When we use language in the participant role we select and order our material according to the demands made by something outside ourselves, something that exists in the situation: information may be true or false and independent observation of all the circumstances could be used to determine which it is: instructions may be precise or vague, clear or confused and their usefulness to people carrying them out provides the basis for determining which they are: argument may be proved illogical, persuasion may prove ineffectual. But in language in the role of spectator we operate on a different principle. We select and arrange our material first to please ourselves: and secondly, not to please other people but to enable others to share our pleasure--which is not the same thing. (Imagine that as I walk on the sea-shore I pick up a pocketful of shells and come home and arrange them. I could select them and arrange them according to two different principles. The unlikelier one shows me to be a biologist: I have picked up shells I needed to complete my showcase and when I get home I arrange them as part of an exemplification of related species of marine life. If you were a better biologist than I was, you might come up behind me and say, 'You've got that wrong--you should put **this** one in **that** place'. The more likely situation--in which I am myself again--is one in which I come home and arrange the shells on my mantelpiece. My principle of arrangement is to make a display, a pattern, that pleases me. You could not then come up and say, 'You've got that wrong', because there is no right and wrong beyond the pleasure or displeasure I feel. My criterion is one of 'appropriateness'--the appropriateness of each item to the other items and to the whole of the design **as it appears to me**.)

D. H. Lawrence said, 'It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives'. Let us broaden that for our present purposes to: 'we act and decide in accordance with the sort of
(cont. on p. 46)

James Moffett (cont. from p. 6)

pediast's judgment on such a writer as Browne is nothing but smart-ass chauvinism: permitted to poison basic information sources, it makes "science" as deadly a censor as ever the Church was during its Inquisition.

We can avoid producing Brownes in our school system by having all youngsters read and write the same things--a goal we have closely approximated--and then their approach will not be unscientific, their assemblage odd, their facts obscure, nor their erudition haphazard. And we will have ensured that no one will be able to emulate the great essayists we hold up as models (or even read them with any comprehension). Real essaying cannot thrive without cultivation of the individual. Who would have any reason to read anyone else? (And I want to know how Browne's style could be worth so much if he were merely raving.)

The second example is personal. When I received the edited manuscript of the original edition of Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13 back from the publisher, I was aghast. "My" editor had re-written sentences throughout the whole book to eliminate first-person references and other elements of the author's presence and voice. This included altering diction and sentence structure at times to get a more anonymous or distanced effect. Faced with the appalling labor of restoring all those sentences, I called the editor, furious. She said righteously, "But we always do that--it's policy." It never occurred to her to exempt, or even to warn, an author who wouldn't be publishing the book in the first place if he weren't regarded as some kind of expert in writing.

Remove the Double Standard

You can't trust your encyclopedia, your publisher, your school administration. And you can't trust yourself until you learn to spot how you too may be spreading the plague, as Camus calls it. The double standard in "Look at the greats, but don't do what they did" naturally goes along with our era of Scientific Inquisition, which is really technocratic plague. Teachers stand in a fine position to spread infection. If you let yourself be

convinced that "personal" or "creative" writing is merely narcissistic, self-indulgent, and weak-minded, then you have just removed your own first person.

James Moffett frequently consults, publishes, and lectures on the teaching of writing. He works at his home in Mariposa, California.

Two Views (cont. from p. 9)

to play an important **developmental** role in schools because certain more complex mental abilities are best developed by the practice of writing (Development of Writing, 201-02). In addition, while class size remains high, writing has to substitute for a great deal of interpersonal speech. As Moffett insists and as Britton's research seems to confirm, English teachers perform important educational tasks not accomplished anywhere else. To summarize, their remarks and research add considerable strength to our belief that despite its enormous demands, our profession is humane and worthwhile.

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James Britton (cont. from p. 5)

people we are'. In participant activity it is the construction we place upon the **new**--the current encounter with actuality--that we attend to: as spectators, it is essentially the **total**--the accumulated view of the world that makes us the sort of people we are--that we are concerned with. Thus, though we have assigned a function, a use, to the language of spectatorship, it is a use which is clearly distinguishable from that of a participant. 'Language to get things done' remains intact as a criterion for the one role, and the language of being and becoming may roughly describe the other.

James Britton is the author of numerous books in the field of composition theory and research. He is associated with the University of London Institute of Education.