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Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education and Democracy, by James C. Conroy

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are relatively common to most of us” (p. 187). There is no questioning the truth of that statement. But as Hunt and Mullins show so well, the devil – and the angel – are in the details.

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BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: THE LIMINAL IMAGINATION, EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

JAMES C. CONROY

PETER LANG, 2004

\$32.95, 217 pages

Reviewed by Edward J. Caron

In *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education and Democracy*, James C. Conroy argues that the forces of consumerism and globalization have come to characterize our conception of what it means to live in a democratic society. Conroy offers an argument, steered by discussions of unique metaphors, that empowers public schools to confront this parochial interpretation of democracy and embrace new notions of what it means to lead the good life in the good society. Conroy succeeds in raising important questions about the dangerous consequences inherent in the maintenance of an economically functionalist orientation to schooling; however, the author ultimately falls short in presenting a compelling case for the implementation of his metaphors in a classroom setting.

Conroy believes the values of late-industrial liberal democracies are inextricably tied to the values of the marketplace. This economic interpretation of democracy, manifested in the political, cultural, social, and, most notably, educational spaces in our society, serves to invalidate alternative perspectives “that might be judged controversial or damaging to social and

economic/market stability” (Conroy, 2004, p. 20). Conroy terms the lack of exposure to multiple points of view “discursive closure” (p. 3), and argues that a more robust interpretation of democracy depends upon teachers challenging students to adopt divergent viewpoints. Encouraging dissonant perspectives, Conroy argues, can be thought of as a manifestation of what he calls “the liminal” or “the intellectual, cultural and ideological spaces that...[exist] on the margins, neither at the centre nor on the outside” (pp. 7-8).

For Conroy, liminality can best be regarded as a critical approach to particular instances of liberal democratic theory without rejecting the theory’s fundamental principles. Although Conroy attempts to distinguish himself from well-known critical pedagogues in the field, the basis on which he seeks to justify liminality is consistent with that of many educational postmodernists who contend that schools are laden with corporate ideology. Postmodernists believe that

students must not be subjected to the transmission of knowledge, but should be taught to question knowledge, see the misrepresentations in it, and search for the imperialism, patriarchy, racism, and vulgar capitalism that has shaped it and that continues to sustain it. (Hlebowitsh, 2004, p. 81)

Because Conroy sees the notion of the liminal as operating on the margins of society, Conroy perhaps is right in characterizing his views as slightly less radical than those of most postmodernists. Nevertheless, it is clear that Conroy’s conception of liminality as a decidedly politicized approach to schooling is heavily influenced by postmodern philosophy.

Conroy believes that schools have an important role to play in cultivating a sense of the liminal and distinguishes between three manifestations of liminality in schools that, when present, can help to combat discursive closure. First, in order to “enable students to adopt critical positions themselves” (Conroy, 2004, p. 60), teachers must offer students experiences and perspectives that challenge the status quo. Second, not unlike Eisner (1994) in his support for “expressive outcomes” (p. 118), Conroy notes the priority teachers must place on the spontaneous and unexpected moments that arise in the classroom. These emergent experiences and conversations offer teachers and students possible encounters with the liminal. Third, teachers and students must be receptive to liminal opportunities as they present themselves, recognizing the possibility that new insights will be gained in the experience. In outlining the features of the liminal classroom, Conroy is quick to point out that contemporary educational policy is at odds with this approach. Like many critics, Conroy regrets the educational implications

and market justifications that accompany the movement toward standards and benchmarks, trends that Conroy claims “turn education into a race-course, the teachers into horse trainers and children into steeple chasers” (2004, p. 40).

Conroy attempts to use four metaphors – laughter and play, the trickster figure, poetry, and religion – to further clarify how teachers might reflect the liminal in their instruction. Ostensibly, Conroy seeks to make these metaphors practically relevant, saying

if the claim made throughout this essay is true, that discursive closure represents a significant danger for liberal democracies in late-industrial society, then it is important that educationalists and teachers have some sense of what might count as appropriate curricular and pedagogical responses. (2004, p. 141)

However, the lengthy discussions of each metaphor, though eloquent and creative, are offered at the expense of a thorough explication of how these metaphors take shape in the daily life of the classroom. Thus, Conroy’s success in promoting the metaphors’ relevance in schools is left subject to questions of implementation.

Conroy’s chapter on poetry as a liminal metaphor is perhaps his most specific. Here, Conroy proposes a change in the way poetry is taught; pedagogy should reflect less of an emphasis on explication and evaluation and focus more on helping students to “understand their own place in the world” (2004, p. 161). Conroy says,

it is the teacher’s task to bring the student in her marginal state together with the poetic in its marginality and to help the students to see in the encounter that the merger of personal horizons may be merged with those of the historico-cultural situatedness of the work. (p. 163)

But even in suggesting that teachers make poetry more personally and politically significant, it is still unclear what this means for teachers. What types of poetry best support Conroy’s vision? Will a more personally relevant approach to the teaching of poetry resonate with students? What curricular restraints or pedagogical challenges might present themselves in light of poetry’s privileged place in the English classroom, and how should teachers respond to these challenges? With a lack of practical clarity, readers swayed by Conroy’s case for the liminal might be left with less than a complete understanding of how a curricular emphasis on poetry challenges students to adopt critical perspectives.

Other questions persist that implicate the applicability of the metaphors

to practice: To what extent is an emphasis on liminality in the classroom to be balanced with more conservative perspectives? How should a liminal approach manifest itself in other subject areas? How should a teacher negotiate the inclusion of liminal experiences in the classroom with school and district curriculum expectations? To what extent is it appropriate for teacher preparation programs to encourage liminal approaches? A concluding chapter that takes on these or other prospective questions would be helpful in further clarifying the significance and relevance of the metaphors to Conroy's vision of democracy.

Perhaps the most interesting section of the book comes at the end where Conroy argues for the liminal function religious – particularly Catholic – schools serve in promoting the common good. Conroy contends that these schools, with their unique perspectives on truth and “human flourishing” (2004, p. 184), help to combat discursive closure. Conroy's perception of Catholic schools as liminal institutions holds some truth – conceiving of the educational experience as one rooted in faith, love, and service epitomizes a radically different conception of the common good as compared to that of public schools. However, let us not make the mistake of labeling Catholic schools as liminal institutions only. Catholic schools have made a remarkable contribution to the more secular conception of the common good, cultivating an enlightened, engaged, and participatory citizenry. As Conroy himself notes, research suggests that Catholic schools are more effective than public schools in developing politically knowledgeable, tolerant, and civically-engaged students (Campbell, 2001).

Betwixt and Between ultimately leaves the reader with more questions than answers as to how the liminal is operationalized in the classroom. This is not to say that Conroy fails to raise important questions about the purpose and character of schools in a liberal democracy. Indeed, he adds his voice to the established corpus of postmodern commentary on schooling and democracy. However, for those who seek to understand Conroy's notion of the liminal in practical terms, this is not the book for you.

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