
The Underground GRAMMARIAN

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Sorrowful Words of Dole

“You start telling the Congress that they should act objectively and reasonably without considering the politics, it’s probably not going to happen.”

WE had a letter recently from a man who was eager to read THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN. It was his hope that we would explain, once and for all, the rules for the placing of other punctuation in the neighborhood of quotation marks.

And we have also been sternly admonished by the Masked Avenger, an intransigent fundamentalist who keeps reminding us of participles and gerunds, and the good old days when our articles seemed to have something to do with our title.

We do admire persnickitiness and intransigence, and we have a little sympathy for both readers, but not much. What, after all, is the important virtue to be learned from strict attention to even the tiniest details of syntax, spelling, and punctuation? It is not the ability to notice and attend to those details; that is nothing more than an essential skill, and the fruit of nothing more than training. The *use* of that skill, however, can provide the substance of education, for, of all skills, it is the most likely to engender the habit of critical and thoughtful attention.

It is not so that they may become perfect in the mechanics of language that we teach children the mechanics of language, but so that they may live in the habit of paying attention to language, the one and only repository of meaning and thought.

It is good to worry about where to put punctuation with reference to quotation marks. It is even better to settle the matter once and for all, and to stop worrying about it. Look it up in some handbook. If you like what you find, use it. If you can find better logic (or even better typography)

with some other rules, do it. Paddle your own canoe.

But skillful paddling is merely necessary. It is not sufficient. It is only a dilettante who would make himself perfect in paddling and go nowhere.

Consider, for instance, the words of the epigraph above, a statement from the mouth of a certain Robert Dole, an elected functionary of our government. He was commenting on a report from some *appointed* government functionaries, who discovered that government could save hundreds of billions here and there through the practice of mere intelligence.

What, then, should we say of the words of Dole? Shall we, because we truly don’t even know which party the man serves, say nothing, as best becomes the ignorant? Shall we confine ourselves to what we are *supposed* to know, commenting cleverly for a while on the obscurity of his antecedent and the uncouthness of his run-on sentence?

Should we not rather remember that those are the words of a government agent who is *not* going to disqualify himself, as he should, from voting on questions related to public policy on education?

He asserts a principle that we have been trained to accept without any thought at all. And what can it mean to give “no thought at all”? It means a failure of the power of language— a kind of deafness to *what is said*, and a kind of dumbness out of which no thing can be said *about* what is said.

Dole tells us that in *his* line of work loyalty to factional beliefs and interests must come before responsibility and objectivity. We are not surprised to hear that, of course. What does surprise us (a little) is that millions of Americans can hear that without anger and disgust, saying, if they say anything, Well, that’s politics.

In fact, however, that is *not* politics. It is politicking, a very different field of study. Politics is the study of the art of governing *well*, by which is meant not *successfully*, or *effectively*, but *virtuously*. Vicious government is frequently successful and effective. Can virtuous government do as well? Can there *be* a virtuous government? A studied inquiry into such questions is the business of politics. The sleazy scramble after office and influence is another sort

of business. The inquiry requires a mind attentive to language and skilled in its use, for it is an inquiry into meaning. The scramble works best where there is a scarcity of such minds, and thus an ignorance of politics. It is not out of knowledge but out of that mental indolence that flatters itself as “realistic” that we can believe that responsibility and objectivity are just too much to expect of elected functionaries of government.

Having heard from Dole, we can now distinguish four classes of Americans from whom we can't expect responsible or objective behavior: infants, imbeciles, *mafiosi*, and elected functionaries of government. While all four classes are also alike in that they *are* capable of successful and effective behavior, according to their various appetites, the first three have one admirable virtue utterly absent in the fourth. Infants, imbeciles, and *mafiosi* are content to mind their own damn business, and don't even *want* to vote on education policies.

And we wonder what Dole wants American education to be, what effect he imagines that it should have. Does he want the children to grow up to be just like him and all of his successful and effective colleagues? Does he want them to be ‘educated’ enough so that they will know better than to deal with each other objectively and responsibly whenever they might lose some advantage thereby? Does he want them to know how to handle other punctuation with reference to quotation marks?

To the last question, we're sure he would say Yes, supposing that it is somehow *different* from the others. It is not. It is the same question.

Punctuating correctly is objective and responsible behavior. It requires judgments of worth and obedience to principle. It is virtuous, a result of both the power and the propensity to distinguish between the better and the worse. It is not much, perhaps, but it is *on the right road*. If enough people will walk it all the way, we'll be free of Doles. That's why politicians are so interested in education.

Nothing to Fear but Fear

By the way, attendance this year for Parent Teacher Conferences were the best ever. ... If you have any suggestions about the

conferences please get in contact with me. Especially if you did not attend and there is something that might make it easier for you to do so.

Sometimes parents ask where are you sending my (son/daughter) to college? Or they may ask “what kind of scholarship will you get my (son/daughter)?” The answer to those questions is the same and very brief. I DON'T.

I have often thought that if only it would be possible for someone to share their experience with others it might help those other people to avoid experiences that might cause problems. As examples—someone that had an unwanted pregnancy, or arrested for drunk driving, or recovering from drug abuse.

From the mind of
Glenn E. Fear, Counsellor

PRUDENT PARENTS are always taking pains to prevent their (sons/daughters) from falling into low company. But, alas, always in vain. Even the (sons/daughters) who escape the baleful influences of the bowling alley and the pool hall will still have to go to school.

And there they will have to hang out with whole herds of the people who make up and perpetuate one of the least intellectual of all of our national institutions.

Schools smell. Go visit one. They smell of many things—stale food and cleaning compounds, acrid fluids that seep from cranky old ditto machines, gymnasiums and locker rooms, subtly different, blended in the aroma of disconsolation of the spirit, dogged, vain endeavor, tiredness, boredom. But never a whiff of the joy of scholarship, the academic counterpart of the odor of sanctity.

The people who work there do not seem happy. They have many complaints. Low pay, no respect, lousy administrators, disorderly students, meddlesome parents. They are like the old ditto machines, whining and grinding, repeating and repeating, and oozing acrid fluids.

Their real interests, those things in which they might take joy, are seldom related to their work, which they nevertheless persist in calling a

“profession.” If they do talk about what they teach, but do not *profess* it is usually because of some requirement of the job, an application for a mini-grant, lesson-plans, the threat of a standardized test.

Their “disciplines” are nothing but titles. They are not disciples, merely workers, and if their work is not *called* menial, it is only because it seldom requires heavy lifting. They are decent folk, surely, but they are just as surely, alas, low company.

How can this be? What brought sour despair into lives that ought to have been rich in the joy that the love of learning brings?

Fear. Fear has brought them low, and made them, who were to have been lights in darkness, low company.

Fear has been their counsellor. In their ears, Fear whispers that the life of the mind is a paltry thing, neither loved nor needed in the *real* world. Fear bids them leave off, lest they be held saps in the real world of snazzy problem-solvers, vain, elitist ruminations on the good, the true, and the beautiful. School is not the House of Intellect. It is the House of Fear.

Glenn E. Fear.

Read again the words of Glenn E. Fear, who is a school “counsellor” in Tipton, Iowa. Read them aloud, and listen. Try to imagine the man. It’s not hard. Every piece of writing is a self-portrait of the mind of the writer.

Don’t judge him. There is neither point nor profit in that. Think only of the mind that utters, its store of learning, its training in the powers of thought and language, its practice in the ways and work of intellect, its ruminations on the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Then ask yourself a few questions: In that sad world of school, who is secure against sadness? Who is right in his element, his natural habitat, a safe haven made by, and for, others just like him? Who will rise in that world, leaving behind forever the ill-tempered teachers, and the scruffy students, and the smells, except, perhaps, for appearing at a commencement now and then, there to be introduced as an “educator”?

If you know the answers to those questions, you know all that anyone needs to know about public schools.

A Sense of Ease

Computer literacy doesn’t require speaking a computer language, nor does it require programming skills, nor does it even require extensive knowledge of already-written programs. All it requires is a sense of ease around computers, and the knowledge that personal computers are powerful tools, and not menacing characters from science fiction.

PETER MCWILLIAMS

The advanced [ETS] placement course in computer science includes such topics as recursion, operations on stacks, lists, and trees, and the heap sort. These are complicated, machine-independent abstractions that are not learned while sitting at a terminal. They are learned by hearing competent lectures, studying a textbook, and by sitting alone gleaning insights from drawing diagrams and walking through prospective codes. ... Replying to the question, What is the best single indicator of an applicant’s programming ability, one of today’s most respected computer scientists, Edsger W. Dijkstra, wrote: “...an absolute mastery of his native tongue.”

MERRIT & STIX

HERE’S what we wish: We wish that we were running a very expensive private school for little children, and that that McWilliams wanted us to take his six-year-old daughter and provide her with a good dose of literacy, the antiquated kind, “book literacy,” they probably call it nowadays.

First we’d take his certified check for our standard, large, unrefundable deposit, and then we’d tell him about our real neat, absolutely painless, and invariably effective Book Literacy Education Program.

The yoke of book literacy is easy, we would tell him, and its burden is light. Quite contrary to the foolish notions of self-appointed reformers, book literacy does *not* require reading and writing in book language. Nor does it require any noticeable knowledge of already-written books. All it requires, as you would surely be the first to

understand, McWilliams, is a sense of ease around books!

Little children, you see, are afraid of books. Yes, afraid. They see them as menacing characters from the walls of doctors' waiting rooms and quiet, dreary libraries, where fun is not allowed. Our program teaches children that books are powerful tools, good for building walls and castles, and for keeping drawings from blowing away, and even for standing on to reach the good stuff that grown-ups like to keep to themselves. Why we actually let our young scholars *play* with books, open them, close them, even turn some of the pages, and all by themselves. That's the *real* education, you know, learning by doing. You just leave your precious little tyke with us, and in no time at all—say ten, twelve years max—she will be the most book-literate kid on the block, chock full of a sense of ease. And all of that for a measly fifteen thou a year!

And may the future bring you a million RETURNS without GOSUB, buster.

We are, as you see, ready to consider "computer literacy." We suspected, mostly because the educationistic faddists were so enthusiastic about it, that it was all bunk.

Now, having done some homework, we can reach a better informed opinion: It *is* all bunk.

To begin with, it is not "literacy" in any reasonable sense of the word. "Literacy" has become nothing but a pretentious title for an "awareness" conjoined with any modicum of acquaintance. If you know that slide-rules exist, you have achieved slide-rule awareness, which is already quite enough to earn you a splendid grade in a mathematics education course. If you can actually use a slide-rule, or even if you have just slid one a bit, you have slide-rule literacy.

(That's just for now of course. The school people have obviously not yet received the pedagogical doctrine of Peter McWilliams, who is a "syndicated computer columnist," just the kind of expert they take from. When they hear the word, they will discover that slide-rule literacy calls for nothing more formidable than a sense of ease around slide-rules.)

And then there's all that bunk about computer "languages," which are languages in just the same way that the "language of the flowers" is language—not at all. They are codes, ingenious and elaborate codes, which is what they must be

if they are to work. Computer languages provide the possibility of an exact and precisely limited correspondence not only between what is said and what is meant, but also between what is meant and what is so in the strictly defined system about which, and *only* about which, statements can be made.

For computing, that's good, and it works. But those same attributes are characteristic of the very least of the powers of language, communication, a power also wielded by wolves and crows. If wolves and crows do not devise computers and computer "languages," it is because they have none of the higher powers of language, especially metaphor and discourse. It is in those powers that we grow when we study language, and to pretend that the study of computer language is the study of language is primarily a convenience for those who pretend that they teach the powers of language.

And then there's another thing—that bunk about "fear of computers." It is, of course, possible that there are certain people who do fear computers, even as there are probably people who fear shredded wheat or party hats. They are loonies. Computers are no more likely than rulers, or even sextants, to provoke fear in people who are not loonies. What we see at work here is a longstanding educationistic con job that has been eagerly adopted by peddlers as well as politicians, who also make their livings by preying on emotions.

It is the pose of the big-hearted giver, who so charitably understands your shortcomings, and so selflessly seeks only your good. He kindly tells you that there *is* a little something wrong with you, maybe just a little learning disability, or an unraised consciousness, or this irrational fear of computers, that you can't seem to overcome all by yourself. But don't worry. Your deficiency is "perfectly natural" in one who has not yet had the inestimable benefit of his ministrations, which he will be only too happy to provide.

And there is yet one more thing—the pernicious notion that learning to work a computer has something to do with education. One of its versions suggests that no one can be educated without learning about computers, which confuses training with education and information with knowledge, as is the custom in the schools. An alternative version pronounces, as

is also the custom in the schools, that *now* we know what to do. *Now* we can teach those students who have stubbornly refused to be taught by “traditional” methods, *i.e.*, the *last* few paroxysms of innovative thrusts.

The other quotation is from a letter to the *NYT* by Susan M. Merritt and Allen H. Stix, members of the computer science department at Pace University. When they say “science,” they seem to mean *science*, which is neither a pleasant feeling nor a vocational skill, but a discipline in the mind. It is to be learned just as they say, which is just as *any* mental discipline is to be learned, by hearing competent lectures, studying books, and sitting alone.

Those things are not allowed in the schools. Competent lectures are elitist and authoritarian, books are just *not* experiential, and sitting alone is aberrant behavior. The schools will have to teach computer science in *their* way. Spending somebody else’s money brings a great sense of ease.

Solemn News

Beginning with the first issue of Volume Eight, February, 1984, we must raise the price of the yearly subscription to \$15.00. We will also have to send as many mailings as possible by third class mail. So, if you do decide to renew, be sure that your address label is correct and current.

We expect that this increase will keep us at work for the *next* seven years. After that, we’ll all be too old to care, probably.

N. B. Retired schoolteachers are still to pay half-price, although we do wonder why they read this stuff at all. You’d think they would prefer to blot it all out.

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Foundations of Education 101

Tyrants never perish from tyranny, but always from folly—when their fantasies have built a palace for which the earth has no foundation.

THOSE are the words of Walter Savage Landor, and we certainly hope that they are true prophecy. But we have some troubling doubts.

Landor probably had in mind the standard and customary tyrant whose follies and fantasies are so dramatic and grandiose that even slumbering Earth will stir herself at last to bring them down. But what about our up-to-date, state-of-the-art tyrants, Pruffrockish promoters of coercion, whose name is Legion, cautious, politic, glad to be of use, and just a bit obtuse, just obtuse enough not to understand that tyranny can also be bland and banal, projecting not palaces but polices and programs? Will Earth bother herself for the likes of them, or will she leave it to her obedient children to yank the foundations of education from under the manipulators and adjusters who run our schools?

In one of America’s Northhamptons—the state is not named in the account we have—there is a certain Edwin Coyle, district school superintendent. He has asked the school board to approve what he calls, either out of irrationality or out of duplicity, a term of “volunteer community service as a graduation requirement.” He justifies his request in these words:

“The proposal makes sense. For 13 years, the schools provide an educational opportunity and we really don’t ask too much of the students. We are asking for thirty hours a year. Young people do not have the opportunity to interact with the needy, the elderly. This will provide a good service opportunity.”

Lucky kids these days. Opportunity knocking all around. And no shortage of government agents to see to it that they answer every knock—or else.

Compassion. That’s what it’s all about. Very compassionate guy, that Coyle. Deep, throbbing compassion for the needy, the elderly. He would dearly love to be out there interacting with such folk. They really need that. But he’s a busy government agent — busy implementing guidelines, busy finalizing service opportunity enhancements to required voluntary interaction opportunities within educational opportunity parameters.

But fear not! The needy and elderly will not go uninteracted with! As long as there is an A who can require B to serve C, compassion will never fail in this great land of ours.

As to how well served the needy and elderly will be by interaction with teenagers interacting under duress for the sake of a lousy diploma attesting to nothing more than thirteen years of a compulsory “educational opportunity” graciously doled out by the Coyles who “really don’t ask too much of the students,” who can say? In fact, who gives a damn? The important thing is to get those kids out there interacting, thus serving two great purposes: persuading the needy and the elderly (and anybody else who will swallow it) that they are wards of the state, and suggesting to the students that the conscience of the individual is best informed by the policies of government.

There be three things, yea four, for which Earth is troubled, for which she tosses in her sleep: the officious governor who requires of the governed what he does not require of himself; the prideful benefactor who grandly dispenses what is not his own; the convinced improver of the world who easily detects the deficiency of virtue in almost everybody else; and in the incurious teacher who ignorantly sows in his students seeds that he wouldn’t like to see sprouting in his own garden. All are tyrants.

And they all hang out in the school business, not infrequently cohabiting in the same body.

We are happy to report that at least for now Coyle’s plan for more involuntary servitude than schools already require has been thwarted by an unusual school board. No member, to be sure, asked the obvious question: So you “really don’t ask too much of the students,” eh? But one board member did suspect that it might actually be

unconstitutional to require children to pay for their “educations” with social work, which does make us wonder where public employee unions stand on the use of free, forced labor doing the interacting that their members get paid for. And another board member sanely suggested that students might be encouraged to *volunteer* for voluntary services, and that those who undertook to encourage them might do so by setting good examples. Whether Coyle has taken up unpaid interacting with the needy and elderly, we don’t wonder at all.

One of Coyle’s further “arguments” consisted entirely of the single, and astonishing, assertion that “eighty percent of the students do not get the experience of doing for others.” Now that is superintending.

How do you suppose he knows that? Is he sure that it is *eighty* percent, and not seventy-seven?

The answers would probably surprise you, for Coyle is surely citing a “study” of some sort, most likely one of those educationistic questionnaires. What he “knows” is how many students say that they take library books to shut-ins or solicit money for new midget football uniforms. His automatic assumption that private acts of private persons are not to be accorded the same worth as officially supervised social programs is what makes his assertion *unconsciously* arrogant and presumptuous. The board should have fired him on the spot, if not for his arrogance and presumption, which we might want to overlook in one who is unconscious of the meaning of his own words, then surely for that very unconsciousness. A school superintendent should at least be in a condition that permits us to presume him responsible for his own deeds.

But they did not fire him. Now you can see why we are troubled; mighty Earth will not bother herself to shake down the dinky little palace of Edwin Coyle. We’ll have to do it ourselves. We’ll think of it as a socially acceptable little “experience of doing for others.”

An Answer for Everything

In Totowa, students in first through eighth grades are required to take philosophy. “They’re made to understand from the beginning that nothing they say is right or

wrong,” says Pat Knapp, a teacher at Memorial Middle School. “It creates a freedom of expression among the children.”

“It teaches you to argue and how to defend your point,” says Mike Rubino, 12, a student at Memorial Middle School. “I go home a lot of times and tell my parents what we’ve learned here. My father kids around now and says, ‘Hey, you’ve got an answer for everything.’”

And when they themselves have confuted many, and been confuted by many, they quickly fall into a violent distrust of all that they formerly held true.

WHEN someone says, “Here is what I think,” what follows is almost never what he thinks. It is usually what he hopes, what he imagines, what he guesses, or, most usual of all, what he believes, or supposes that he believes.

The neglected but essential first act of thinking is to distinguish mental acts and conditions from one another. Panic and madness are not *other ways* of thinking. Such conditions preclude thinking, and the same must be said of other conditions that only *seem* less disruptive than panic and madness—fear and desire, for instance, and even that sacred old cow in whose name we permit ourselves uncountable vices and follies, “sincere conviction.”

No one ever sees himself as led by evil intentions, unless, of course, he has fallen into the vexatious habit of questioning his own convictions, and all the more relentlessly to that degree in which they commend themselves as ‘sincere.’ Our educationists, out of a sincere conviction that it is neither humanistic nor democratic to tamper with their own sincere convictions, have escaped that troublesome habit. They can thus persist, with all serenity of Twain’s Christian holding four aces, in promulgating ‘education’ as sincere conviction. The “educated” person, as understood in the government schools, is what is called in Orwell’s *1984*, “rightthinkful.” Thus it is that those schools have so little fervor for science and mathematics, which do not easily lend themselves to the inculcation of “bellyfeel,” as Orwell called the

contented credulousness of the sincerely convinced.

It is, after all, the chosen business of government to govern, which is surely the easier as the governed are credulous and easy to convince, *sincerely*, now of this, now of that. And just now, the government educationists have discovered that the teaching of “thinking” can actually be used to reinforce their efforts in the affective domain of sincere convictions, provided only that the meaning of the word “thinking” be appropriately misconstrued.

Consider poor Pat Knapp, teacher and thinker, who is clearly not at all astonished by her own assertion that the budding little thinkers in her care are “*made to understand from the beginning that nothing they say is right or wrong.*” One really could make a good course in thinking out of a semester of disciplined inquiry into that statement, but that is not what is going to happen in Pat Knapp’s “philosophy” course in Memorial Middle School.

What *will* happen?

Rapping and relating will happen. Pet notions, vague suppositions, uninformed opinions, and many notably familiar sincere convictions will be granted the rank of “thought,” for Pat Knapp’s bizarre demurrer actually has a meaning even more preposterous than the obvious one. In schoolthink, “neither right nor wrong” is the code phrase for “not wrong.” As to whether the children should *also* hold as neither right nor wrong the assertion that what *they* say can be neither right nor wrong, Pat Knapp will not need to bother her head. Sincere conviction, along with a little reminder from the teacher’s schoolthink manual, assures her that she is “not wrong.”

In any case, the question has already been expelled from “philosophy” class in that pre-emptive strike by which the students were “made to understand from the beginning” what thoughtful inquiry would find absurd in the end. As to how that remarkably convenient “understanding” was awakened in the children, whether by argument or through some appeal to the natural credulousness of children, we are in no doubt whatsoever.

Sincere convictions, however various and contradictory, all grow from the root of unreason and blossom best in a climate of credulousness. That is exactly why there can *be* such things as

various and contradictory convictions. Just down the hall from Pat Knapp's no-fault philosophy encounter group, there is a classroom where there are no contradictory or various convictions about the square of the hypotenuse, and others nearby, where there are no convictions whatsoever, but only knowledge or ignorance, as to the valence of sulphur or the prepositions that take the dative. Down in the woodshop, the well-cut pieces fit sweetly together; the ill-cut don't. Out on the ball-field, the sun beams equally on hits, runs, and errors, and the team with the higher score wins. All around Memorial Middle School, children can behold truth, can see that what is so, is so, that act and consequence are irrevocably married, that principle persists, neither seeking approval nor fearing reprimand, that all learning is the individual mind's gradual and endless re-enactment of the creation of Order out of Chaos.

But not in thinking class, of course. Thinking is much more *important* than remembering endings or sticking silly pieces of wood together. In thinking, anything goes. It's real neat.

On the other hand, though, there's little Mike Rubino, who has an answer for everything. He must be one royal pain in the neck for Pat Knapp, with all his arguing and defending of points, which can hardly be conducive to other kids' "freedom of expression," to say nothing of their feelings of self-worth. What can be more deflating (and antidemocratic) than to have some wise guy catch you with a *non sequitur* on your chin, and your undefined terms hanging out?

So how did it happen that at least one student, even in the mad dance of freedom of expression where nothing is either right or wrong, came to have any idea at all of such things as *non sequitur* and undefined terms, of the fact that there is such an act as wrong thinking, which can be indisputably distinguished as such? Was Pat Knapp nodding when Mike Rubino learned "to argue and defend"? Did he notice, in that nifty packet of thinking learning materials, something that she did not notice, or found not to her liking, and so chose to reject, that she might continue in that sincere conviction out of which she enhances the self-esteem of credulous little children by *making them understand* that nothing they say is either right or wrong?

That is what we suspect. Even in the claptrap world of learning materials, there can hardly be a

"thinking package" that does not allude to the demands of logic, the law of thought. Educationists do not like logic. They suppose it only a clever trick of skillful language, which they also dislike, and disapprove it as an impediment to sincere conviction, which it surely is. Pat Knapp probably does know that a *non sequitur* simply doesn't follow, but she probably also "knows," in the weird special "knowledge" that true believer claim, that a mere technicality like logic can not be granted the undemocratic and unhumanistic power to inhibit freedom of expression in children who are supposed to be learning to think.

Mike Rubino has, to be sure, escaped something, through what his teachers probably consider tricky language, but he is in danger of being enslaved by something no less destructive. It is not his tongue, but his mind, that has brought him to argue and defend; it is not his mind, but his school, that has brought him to believe that logic is a sharp stick, and thinking, a competitive sport, in which you can win points by popping your opponent's inflated notions. What else could we expect in any student attentive enough to notice that the teacher recites slogans while the very substance of the course she pretends to teach proves her either deceived or deceiving?

Thus cynics are made, who have an answer for everything. Thinkers have a question for everything.

The educationistic empire depends for its continuance on a belief that belief is a way of knowing, and feeling a fit guide. Because only their hands have been on the switches for several generations now, they have brought almost the entire nation to believe that education should be the inculcation of whatever beliefs and feelings seem socially desirable, which belief requires the support of another belief continuously promulgated in the schools: the belief that there are no fixed principles, that truth is relative, and that nothing is either right or wrong.

They will be delighted to "teach" thinking. They have obviously figured out how to produce either sheep who will *believe* that nothing is either right or wrong, or cynics who will *conclude* that nothing is either right or wrong.

The educationists will take either. They have an answer for everything.

Vocabulary Corner considers...

**The Bachelor of Orts
and a Little Twitch of Alvarado Too**

HAMPSHIRE College is some kind of school up in Amherst, Mass. Last January, it bestowed one of its bachelor's degrees upon a Dwork, a certain John Dwork, to be precise. What he is doing now we don't know, but he will someday be our first Secretary of a newly expanded Department of Education and Entertainment.

Dwork spent a good part of his career at Hampshire College in playing Frisbee. He ended up with a degree in "Flying Disc Entertainment and Education." He modestly claims only that he has "almost vindicated the whole new American lifestyle."

The whole new American lifestyle.

Frisbee.

Entertainment.

Education.

"Entertain" comes to us from *entre* and *tenir*. Who is *entretenu* is *held between*, suspended, floating perhaps, almost without motion, like a Frisbee well and truly thrown.

"Education" comes to us from other roots, but so what? From the great deep of infancy to the great deep of labor, children must go. Give them entertainment, rap-sessions, self-esteem, film-strips, field trips, Frisbees, fun, the whole new American lifestyle.

Involuntary twitches of the mouth are Nature's way of punishing those who will not make their minds hold still. They come in waves, like swine flu, and spread rapidly among those whose natural defenses against absurdity have been destroyed by careers in politics or degrees in education.

One of the nastiest twitches going around just now takes the form, but not the meaning, of "perception." The word is habitually mouthed in such a way as to suggest some failure in those who perceive rather than a deficiency in that which is perceived.

Here, for instance, is that Alvarado fellow in New York, offering what he probably considers an explanation for a shortage of teachers in the schools of certain neighborhoods:

"We just don't have enough teachers to go around, and the perception of those areas is such that a teacher says, 'I would rather teach elsewhere.'"

The solution is thus to change the perception, which is much easier than civilizing ignorant and violent children, which is Alvarado's "profession."

THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN is set in type by hand and printed by letterpress as God intended. Thus it is a mere coincidence when the month named on any issue happens to match reality. It takes four to six weeks to set each issue, and when it's done we send it out. It would be most accurate, no doubt, to abandon the traditional academic schedule with which we began and claim to appear, on an average, every six and a half weeks, but we do like to print the little calendar cuts that appear in every issue.

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The Saltine Solution

OUR School Doings Reporter, a young lady of unusually delicate sensibilities, does most of her research in a nearby state mental institution. It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it.

She recently brought in a detailed report of the Doings in an eleventh grade class in "social

studies,” which we can not print. Our readers have delicate sensibilities of their own.

But we can not let it pass without comment. In fact, it reveals so much about the life of the mind in America in general, and the molestation of the minds of children in particular, that we are devoting this issue to a consideration of the Children Question, which is much more important than the School Question.

Let us go, then, to a neighborhood state mental institution, where some children, required by law to present themselves for daily socialization in that place, are serving a brief term of involuntary servitude as a captive audience for another child. They are all engaged in a “social study,” hearing what the educationists call an “oral report.” (We’d rather not touch that line. Do it yourself.) The oral reporter is a girl child, reciting some notions and opinions that she claims as *her own*, although they are indistinguishable from the widely held and much publicized notions and opinions of millions of others.

Her oral report is not a *report* but a homily. (School people think such distinctions trivial.) Nor was it entirely oral, for some helpful adults had provided the child with a short movie to show her classmates. And more than somewhat grisly it was, for the girl child’s chosen topic was the vexed question of just and appropriate public policy on abortion.

Of course.

You didn’t imagine, did you, that a government high school social studies class would waste time on trivia like the unification of Germany or Madison’s idea of federalism? That stuff is not important. The important thing is to encourage children to *express themselves*, to make public display of their feelings and beliefs.

The girl child of our tale was more than willing to make public display of her feelings and beliefs. She was eager. She was keen to win converts, and seems to have supposed, as any child would, that the sincerity of her display, along with a little help from some indubitably gruesome footage, would have that effect.

It did not. Irony undid her.

She was quite right, of course, to suppose that children might be persuaded into certain feelings and beliefs through some supposedly sincere display of the same, especially when accompanied by some dramatic and supposedly

relevant evidence. That is exactly how children *do* come to have the feelings and beliefs that they suppose their own. But in this case, the young persuader’s performance was marred by a fatal error that even high school children could detect. She referred repeatedly to the grave consequences of injections of what she called “saltine solution.”

Saltine solution.

Cute. An innocent and childish error, no doubt. Hardly worth taking seriously. And surely not in any way a discredit to the young and sincere persuader. We do not, after all, pronounce worthless the prayer of the little child who says “Harold be thy name.” Nor should we.

And no more should we ask that child to expound doctrine. Should he have any theological opinions at all, they will be worthless recitations of what he has heard, which is quite bad enough, and of what he *supposes* that he has heard, which is worse. What weight then, shall we accord the notions of the saltine solution girl? Is her case different? Shall we overlook a trivial mistake and permit *her* to expound doctrine?

Is her mistake trivial? Does she know what a saltine is? Has she ever asked herself how such an ominous substance can be derived from such an amiable little cracker? Has she ever asked *anyone*, especially one of those who *told* her about saltine solution? Is that what they called it, or did she stumble into that remarkably unlikely error all by herself? Does she not *listen* to her own words, and consider their meanings? If she gives her own discourse so little attention, why should her listeners give it more? Should they have to *guess* which of her statements are made out of certain knowledge and clear understanding, and which out of unapprehended ignorance and automatic recitation?

And shall we hold that little girl to account for the moral and intellectual derelictions suggested by such questions? Absolutely not.

Although she was put forth as one who understood the solemn mysteries of our life and of our death, she did not truly speak. Others used her voice. Others took advantage of a child’s natural credulousness, and a child’s desperate need to secure the approval of those into whose care it happens to have fallen.

“No child under the age of fifteen,” wrote Schopenhauer, “should receive instruction in subjects that may possibly be the vehicle of

serious error, such as philosophy or religion, for wrong notions imbibed early can seldom be rooted out, and of all the intellectual faculties, judgment is the last to mature.”

Plato said as much, but he suggested a much greater age. It is a doctrine that we hate. Almost every one of us is a partisan of some faction, armed with the belief that “wrong notions” are the specialty of the *other* faction. Knowing that children are indeed susceptible to emotional persuasion, and not protected by the habit and power of rational inquiry, we hasten to take advantage of their helplessness in our *right* cause before our opponents can commit that atrocity in their *wrong* cause.

That the saltine solution reporter took one side rather than the other in the Great Abortion Struggle, tells us which side got to her first. Some other child will recite other feelings and beliefs about the solemn mysteries of life and death. Maybe she, too, will talk about the saltine solution. Maybe not. It doesn’t matter.

In either case, one more assignment will be done, one more hollow class filled, one more mother satisfied, and, as in this case, no one will even *ask* about that solution.

The Atheist Child and Other Child Prodigies

MONTHS AGO, we had a chatty letter from a regular reader, who was reporting on some horrific doings at the local high school. He reported on more of the same at a local private school. He dismissed the latter, however ruefully, by admitting that parents had the right to choose for their children whatever ‘education might seem good to them.

Lots of people say that; very few would deny it—in public. Since those few are the rare educationists who are willing to *admit* their belief that *government* should choose the “education” of children, we hate to seem to second even their unspoken denial of that supposed “right” of parents.

But we must. Logic and decency require it.

Consider first that true education must provide the habits and powers of unrestricted thoughtful inquiry—freedom of the mind, and also the habits and powers of self-knowledge and self-

government, which is also freedom of the mind. An “education” that does *not* provide those things is just trash.

Consider now a not unfaithful rephrasing of the “right” of parents: X has the right to determine the degree of freedom, if any, that will be possible in the mind of Y.

That’s some right. Which would you guess: that the Founding Fathers were *going* to spell that out in the Constitution but finally decided that we would naturally assume it, or that they would find it a vile abomination, the antithesis to everything for which they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor?

Of all that, we were put in mind by the atheist child, of whose rather astonishing existence we happened to read on the letters page of the *New York Times*. The atheist child’s father was warning us all that any public display of non-atheism in the schools would be a violation of the “civil right” of the atheist child, who would become forthwith yet another of America’s already uncountable “oppressed minorities.” He reminded us, too, that we had a “bad record” with oppressed minorities, leaving us wondering what we might have done to achieve a *good* record with those oppressed minorities.

He also left us wondering how on Earth a little child ever *became* an atheist child in the first place. We are only mildly surprised when some little girl tears off the Paganini caprices, and not surprised at all when a pimply computnik in Cupertino gets into the mainframe at NASA, but an atheist child... Wow. In fact, if we hadn’t learned better from the *Times*, we would have thought an atheist child no more probable than a deconstructionist duck, or a rutabaga whose ruminations had driven it, however imperceptibly, to the very brink of logical positivism.

We would dearly love to meet the atheist child. We would like to sit with him and hold high converse, to learn at last the final resolutions of knotty doubts and questions, every one of them having been turned, for countless generations, now this way and now that, and all to no avail—until just now, of course. We would like to learn, for education, the life of the mind, is our business, how one so young came to discover and master the thorny intellectual discipline out of which to formulate and adopt his stern Weltanschauung.

We would like also to be instructed in the logic by which his corollaries are derived. We only hope that we will be able to follow the elegant argument by which he demonstrates that public displays of non-atheistic practices constitute nothing less than the oppression of *non-non-atheists*. We could really use that argument; we are compelled to behold all around us, and especially in the schools, governmentally supported displays of the abominable practices of fools and charlatans. Now if we could only take them to court and prove them oppressors, this whole galling enterprise might turn out to be not utterly futile and empty after all.

We do hope that the atheist child's father, who must be a dilly himself, will invite us up for a seminar with his prodigious son.

But maybe he won't.

Well, no matter. We have other resources. We will go to the Mormon child, or the Roman Catholic child. We will seek out the elusive Muslim child, and readily discover the fundamentalist-creationist child. Near the ice-cream vendor's wagon at the first convenient demonstration, we will linger with the liberal child, and the conservative child, right after the three-legged race at the Rotary Club picnic, we will not fail to consult. The Republican child and the Democrat child will soon present themselves at our very door, bearing leaflets attesting to the conclusions of their deliberations on the high art of virtuous government, and the results of their investigations into fiscal policy and the *real* intentions of the Kremlin.

Of such child prodigies, there is no scarcity at all. And from every single one of them we will discover exactly what we could have discovered from the "atheist" child: that all their labels need quotation marks, that they are all unwitting conscripts in someone else's army, and that someone else has some special, and passionate, interest of so little intellectual merit that it must call children as witnesses.

Here is the fundamental reason for all the shabby dodges and spastic fads of American schools: We don't want education. If we object to the indoctrination practiced in the schools, it is not because we hate indoctrination, but because *we* want to do it. We want to inculcate our notions and beliefs in our children, so that we can then point to those very children as living (and

adorable) testimony not only to the power and validity of those very notions and beliefs, but to the justice of our demands for recognition in public policy, and legal protection against the "oppression,"—or even the *affront—to* which we might be subject because of the existence of *other* factionalists with *other* beliefs and notions. Wrong ones. It's a pity about *their* children, of course, but of *ours*, we have the right to make *true* believers, and to protect them from the corruption of uncertainty.

We can see now that Socrates was indeed guilty as charged. He did corrupt the youth. There isn't another way. If he hadn't, we would know and care about him just as much as the people of the Forty-fifth Century will know and care about your local superintendent of schools. While there are parents so enslaved by faction that they will molest the minds of children for its sake, while the state looms, which would dwindle into decent service without the nourishment of factionalism, any true teacher will have to corrupt the youth. It is their only hope of the examined life.

But be not afraid, dear father of the delicate atheist child. True teachers have been exceedingly rare, and we are always doing everything we can to prevent them. If your child ever does escape you, it will not be into the corruption of the examined life, but only into the unexaminable beliefs of some *other* faction, which would be not be so drastic a change as you might think. However different the details of their beliefs, factions all share the same deepest principle. They all depend upon, nourish, and applaud, that very condition which you, first of all, depended upon, nourished, and applauded in your currently atheist child. Credulousness.

A Special Place in Heaven

IF a child gets a paper back with circles around half the words, it won't take him long to figure out—the less I write, the fewer mistakes I make. I think children are writing better now than they ever did and it's because we've taken the pressure off spelling and grammar. They're finally experimenting, they're taking chances because they aren't getting papers back with every spelling error circled. Did we ask them for correct spelling or did we ask them

for ideas? The ideas should come first, then we'll work on the spelling and grammar.

WHEN is "then? When will that day come, and who will rejoice in it, when the little children will have successfully completed their "experimenting" with "ideas," and find themselves ready, at long last, to be initiated into the greater mysteries of spelling and grammar?

And who is that "we," who will—someday, later—take on the sad and arduous task of putting the pressure back *on* spelling and grammar, those notorious inhibitors of ideas?

We can sure as hell tell you who *won't* have that unhappy responsibility. Vera Mykolajiw, the Canadian schoolteacher quoted above, will not be troubled at all by that tiresome obligation. She, having more valuable things to do, neat "idea" things, will gladly leave the less valuable stuff to "we," which is always to say, somebody else, later, maybe.

And who are those *other* "we," the "we" who are supposed to have asked for our children not dull spelling and grammar but the scintillating play of ideas? Who spoke for "we," and told Vera Mykolajiw what "we" want? Is she obediently doing what "we have asked, or has she decided, to remarkably convenient effect, that were "we" sufficiently enlightened "we" would *of course* want children who can't spell to experiment with ideas?

Here is a tremendous truth about schools, almost all schools, and especially government schools: THERE IS NO ONE THERE. When you take your child to school, no *person* can stand forth and say: I am the one. Mine is the mind that judges here, and here are its understandings. Judge them for yourself. Then take your child away or leave him with me.

There is not one person who *will* say: I alone am responsible for what I do, and for what I fail to do, I, and I alone, am to blame.

You won't even find a person who is willing to say: I am going to teach spelling and grammar. Instead, you will hear thousands of mouths telling you what "we" want and reciting in chorus the airy assurance of no one in particular that "we" will do some thing or other "then," no doubt.

What a child needs, what every one of us needs every day, is a teacher who says: *I will do now* what should be done now, and *then* what should

be done then, and I know how to tell the one from the other.

Vera Mykolajiw "teaches" experimenting with ideas to eighth grade children who are obviously not very good at spelling and grammar. They have, like Immanuel Kant, devoted seven years to not studying spelling and grammar. Just a few years ago, the teachers of these benighted children were flattering themselves as awakeners of ideas in childish minds whose every "idea" was nothing but a more or less garbled version of what someone else had said, and passing off as "taking chances" the baffled, disorderly recitations of children no more capable of "experimenting," which is *not* another word for fumbling in the dark, than of spelling, which *is* another word for a discipline in the mind. And those teachers, too, in their time, must have said, The ideas should come first, then we'll work on the spelling and grammar

And who did *they* mean by "we"? Vera Mykolajiw ?

Well, she hasn't really let them down. She has in fact, done exactly the right thing, the school thing. She has pointed. . . somewhere. . . over there. . . where there is always plenty of "we." But not a single "I."

We discovered Vera Mykolajiw in *The Record Sentinel*, of Tottenham, Ontario. The reporter, doing a folks-around-town feature, asked her if she thought there might be a special place in heaven for dedicated teachers. She replied that she hoped there would be such a place for *all* teachers.

We can hear Lot now: If I can find ten, Lord, who did it themselves, will you spare the whole pack?—*All right, ten will do.*—Uh, well, suppose, of the ten, there lack but five?—*Very well, for five I will not cast them out.*—And if there is only one?—*Enough already! Show me the one.*—Well, you see, they don't operate quite that way. Would you settle for no one in particular?— *I think you'd better go and start to pack.*

*Neither can his mind be thought to be in tune,
whose words do jarre;
nor his reason in frame,
whose sentence is preposterous.*



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Hours of Pain-free Sleep

If the kids can't have a little fun along with their work, they have nothing to look forward to, to make them want to come to school.

Colwell argued that physicians and psychiatrists had turned to humor to treat patients. If humor can help in treating disease, why not to teach children?

THE theorizers and teachers who inform the life of the mind as seen in the government schools must harbor some very queer notions about those who choose to lead that life.

They "appreciate" certain poets and writers, for they imagine that "art" is just a form of "self-expression," which requires neither long study nor hard labor nor special talent nor perfected skill. But how do you go about "appreciating" Newton, or Montaigne, or Thucydides, or even that weird professor of medieval drama into whose class you stumbled because it was the only available humanities elective in your free period just before lunch? So what is it with those guys? What are they, some kind of masochists?

American educationism is actually a religious cult deriving its theory and practice from numerous small articles of belief. Here are two of them:

¶ Study, learning, and practice, except in certain extra-curricular activities, are difficult and unpleasant.

¶ Children are sick, and the proper business of schooling is their cure.

These doctrines are propagated by recitation and role-modeling in the teacher-training academies, but, truly, without much need. Of the first, most teacher-trainees are already convinced, for it corresponds exactly to their own experience as students. Of the second, they are delighted to

be convinced, for it lends the glamour of healership to a calling into which they were forced by their SAT scores.

Like all cultish superstitions, these two engender the practices that seem to prove them true, and thus providers of justification for the practices by which they are themselves justified. It's a neat trick, which, like other brands of ideological "argument," proves conclusively whatever it assumes as true.

The citations above are taken from cases in point in the first, we have the subtle pedagogical theorizing of Raye Ann Heath, a first-grade teacher in Paducah. In one of those silly "feature" stories by which newspapers promote nonsense in the schools, *The Paducah Sun* reported the celebration of Michael Jackson Day in Heath's class.

It was exactly what you imagine, complete with T-shirts and solitary gloves, and even—this *is* school, you know—"an overhead projector drawing of Michael Jackson filled [?] with arithmetic problems." The children, Heath explained, had been "bogged down with work" and needed "a little fun," which she inconsistently sought to justify as avoidance therapy by saying, "Maybe this will get it out of their systems." As to why *that* effect should be expected to flow from an official (and tax-supported) endorsement of mindless entertainment as a goal for whose sake some work might be worth doing, Raye Ann Heath offers no theorizing.

Which brings us to Rodney Dangerfield, or, more precisely, to a certain Clyde Colwell. Colwell is a poseffor of something at Kansas State University's teacher academy, and an assiduous imitator of Rodney Dangerfield. He worked for months on this really neat take-off, but stage-fright has thus far prevented him from offering it to a waiting world. But no matter. The world's loss is educationism's gain, for Colwell has put behind him his disappointment at not being able to imitate somebody else's version of mindless entertainment and has gone on to devise his own version. Clyde Colwell has actually discovered that *humor*—that's right, humor—can be *used* right in the *classroom*!

RevoLUtionary! And indeed, "Colwell and...his disciples" *have*, as *The Arizona Republic* tells us, "revolutionized teaching by stripping classes of

the dry and the unimaginative and substituting humor.”

In an “English language exercise,” for instance, Colwell gets a million laughs by calling a thermos bottle a “thirst-aid kit.” Boffo, no? And in a math class he rolls them in the aisles by stripping from addition and subtraction problems those dry and unimaginative trains and water-buckets that we remember from the bad old days before the invention of humor, and substituting vampires. Socko.

Among educationists, who couldn’t find the humor in Plato or Newman even if funding were offered, that sort of thing *is* thought funny. Adults and *little* children will recognize it as imbecilic condescension, and pathetic.

But it is even worse than that, for Colwell also does a little vampire take off by sucking rich blood from a help less victim and digesting it into quite another substance. He cites, as though it supported his notions, *Anatomy of an Illness*, a good and serious book by Norman Cousins. Colwell seems not to have read the book itself, quoting only from a *Reader’s Digest* rehash a sentence in which Cousins speaks of the “anæsthetic effect” of a good bout of laughter, which might provide “at least two hours of pain-free sleep.” It may not seem much but a “thirst-aid kit” might not have done as well.

No thoughtful reader of that book could find Cousins a man who would recommend anæsthesia as a teaching device, or who sees the life of learning as a painful illness that requires the occasional respite of pain-free sleep. Those are Colwell’s views.

And there are lots of people in the schools who share those views, but they aren’t the children, or, more accurately, they aren’t the children who are just starting out in school. *They* love learning, and enjoy it as health. They are, in fact, very much like those queer ducks whom their teachers just can’t understand—wonderers, whose delight is in understanding. Then they see that they are being amused and cajoled, however ineptly, as though to be coaxed, and that their teachers just can’t wait till Friday, or for Michael Jackson Day, whichever comes next.

So the educationists are right after all. The children *are* sick. The heavy air of school, tainted with substances far more toxic than asbestos, has made them sick.

And Colwell is right after all. What those children need is a rowdy bout of uproarious laughter. And when that day comes in which the children can thoughtfully consider and understand the works of Colwell, and laugh their heads off, in that day they will be well.

The Seat of Sympathy A Colossal Pain in the Bowel

. . . the most serious objection raised by those who wrote in opposition to the idea is that government-mandated service is an infringement upon individual freedom—that . . . mandatory service is servitude. In response, I would note that while there obviously have been problems related to the mandated military draft, the requirement of mandatory education . . . is widespread in contemporary societies.

David S. Saxon

If anything ail a man, so that he does not perform his functions, if he have a pain in his bowels even,—for that is the seat of sympathy,—he forthwith sets about reforming the world.

Henry David Thoreau

THE whole history of our versatile and diligent species reveals not a single example of an outrage committed or an abomination practiced by a person who had taken upon himself the stupendous task of making the world a worse place. Sincere and dedicated Do-badders may well be, for all we know, as cunning as the serpent, but they are surely as harmless as the dove. With sincere and dedicated Do-gooders, it often seems just the other way around. Abomination and outrage are their specialties, in fact, but in a really swell cause.

The David S. Saxon quoted above is an unmitigated Do-gooder, whose words we found in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 25, 1984, exactly the right year, in an essay titled “It’s Time for a New Look at an Old Idea: Mandatory Universal Service,” in which the word ‘universal’ turns out to mean: “*absolutely everybody* in an age group other than Saxon’s.”

So mightily stirred up in Saxon are the writhing bowels of compassion, that he wants *some* of the

rest of us to force some *others* of the rest of us to interact with all in desperate plights, and to gather rubbish in the streets. Those “others” are young people who would be “provided access to higher education...on the basis of enlightened *quid pro quo*” for that degree to which they can get their *own* bowels into an uproar over “conservation projects, community activities, and health care activities, among others.”

Although Saxon’s job as “chairman of the corporation” at MIT obviously leaves him more free time than he ought to have, we don’t suspect that he would be willing even to *administer* his mighty project for the moral improvement of other people. But he would surely be glad to provide wisdom and counsel. Perhaps he would let his light so shine before men that they might—well, not exactly see his good *works*, since he is not in the age group in which the gathering up of somebody else’s rubbish *is* virtuous—but they might at least get some idea of what he imagines that he means by that “enlightened” *quid pro quo*.

In one respect, Saxon is right. The idea of a mandatory universal service that the individual owes by nature to the state is indeed an old idea. It is *so* old, in fact, that anyone who wants truly to test its merits can readily find thousands of years of both record and speculation as to its roots and fruits. Like any idea, it *is* always worth a new look, but a *look* requires *looking*. He is no looker, but only a dangerous trifler, who climbs up on the podium of expediency and blats out his belief that an idea which the framers of our Constitution found abhorrent might really be a great idea anyway.

The Emperor Xerxes, like his father before him, had that same old idea fixed firmly in his mind. In his time, too, it was old. He expected an easy victory over the outnumbered and disunited Greeks, who were unruly, and served no master. When Demaratus explained that the Greeks were volunteers who had *chosen* to serve an even sterner master than Xerxes himself, and that their master was The Law, he made distinctions too subtle for the Emperor of all the East, whose mind was clouded by an old idea. And what Darius had failed to learn at Marathon, Xerxes failed to learn at the Hot Gates, and failed once more to learn at Salamis, watching his vessels burn and go down. He never did learn the difference between the laws and The Law, by

virtue of which the Preamble *precedes* the Constitution.

And what has Saxon learned? Has he discovered some hitherto unnoticed meanings in the story of Xerxes, of the Bourbons, of Hitler? By what line of reasoning, and out of what evidence, has he refuted Jefferson and so many others? In his meditations on this stern old idea, how has he evaded the fanged horror that any prudent thinker would expect to meet in that dark wood—the simultaneous justification of “mandatory universal service” and slavery? Does he see no peril there? Does he think it enough to say, as though *answering* the charge that he has proposed “servitude,” that there *is* “mandatory education” in the world? Does he imagine that he is talking to babies,* who will accept that “answer” as reasoning, or is that just the way they reason at MIT?

There is, however, no path of logic in Saxon’s piece, no analysis, no refutation, no demonstration, none of the things that even the freshmen at MIT *ought* to know enough to provide in the course of argument. Saxon excuses himself from such tiresome restraints on self-expression by adopting a pose of impartiality. Answering criticism of one of his earlier “looks” at this old idea, he now says: I was only calling for a comprehensive study.’ To that demurrer, he provides unintended contradiction by pre-empting that “study” and going blithely on to enumerate all the pressing social problems that would be solved by a national scheme of mandatory universal (for some of the people some of the time) service,

If we remove from Saxon’s essay his remarkably uninformed call for a “comprehensive study” that has been going on since Plato and that a conscientious scholar would review lest he call for new look out of ignorance of the old look, if we ignore his facile praise of a scheme that he pretends only to want to have “studied,” if we skip over (what chagrin) the weasel words like “enlightened *quid pro quo*” in his managerial suggestions, we are left with almost nothing. It is, however, a very important almost nothing. It is

* *The Chronicle* has since printed a couple of letters commenting on Saxon’s manifesto. It seems that he was talking to babies.

Saxon's one little stab at logic, his false analogy about "education."

It was surely an interesting process in Saxon's mind that brought him to say, in effect: Well, since we already have "mandatory education," we could also justify certain *other* kinds of compulsory "service" to the nation. While we wouldn't go so far as to accuse Saxon of pondering the *meaning* of his own words, we will contend that he was jerking his knee in the educationistically approved fashion, obediently reciting what may be the biggest of all Big Lies, and the most pernicious.

There is simply *no such thing*, either in this nation or any other, or in any place on the whole face of Earth, as "mandatory education." But there is no lack of thoughtless people who imagine that there *is* such a thing, or of knaves who find it remarkably convenient that thoughtless people by the millions *do* imagine such a thing.

Any thoughtful understanding of "education" will show it, regardless of particulars, an attribute or a quality that can *not exist* except in the inner life of a *person*, and that can no more be "mandated" than love, or honor, or truthfulness, or wisdom. But to know that much, there isn't even any need to *form* a thoughtful understanding of education. The same is shown by the silly understanding that informs the practice of the government schools.

Is their basic and minimum competence mandated? Are conventional spelling and accurate arithmetic commanded by law? Are those students in danger of prosecution, who have not appropriately related to others, or who have appreciated less than sufficiently the plight of the elderly or the Cultural Heritage of the Month? Do district attorneys seek indictment of the ignorant and illiterate, who stubbornly remain, contrary not only to the laws but also to our highest educational aspirations, unable to compete with the Japanese?

What, then, *is* mandated? Only one thing: the physical presence of certain persons in certain places at certain times. And, as the results of their presence, what effects *might* sometimes be achieved, and what effects will *always* be achieved?

Some children will form some part of the foundation upon which an education may

someday be built. That is inevitable. It will happen where there is schooling or where there is none, and, often, in spite of schooling.

But, while the benefits that may fall to any given child are matters of luck and circumstance and hardly to be guaranteed, the mandated *presence* of that child *is* a guarantee of survival and prosperity to a colossal agency of government and all who live because *it* lives, including all who live by the countless industries and services that that agency requires.

That is an interesting arrangement. A truly impartial observer from another planet might amaze us with his judgment of it as a supposed necessity in a "free" society. How would he be wrong to describe it as a system that exists because of its power to enforce the presence of children, and that guarantees some advantage to all who are associated with it, except the children. He might even report to the creatures back home: These Earthers do many such paradoxical things, and always out of what they suppose the best of motives, especially that one that they can no more examine than resist—the passion to bring about the moral improvement of somebody else.

There is no doubt that the repeal of forced attendance laws would cause years of disorder, but so too did the American Revolution. And what Saxon has in mind is more than the King dared. Furthermore, should the many Saxons of our time simply speak the truth instead of talking about mandatory *education*, they drag us by logic into the consequences of our folly. An argument that justifies forced service will do the same for forced labor.

Of course, the children in the government schools are not really "forced labor." All they have to do is sit there, in nothing more than forced presence, serving the needs of the nation. They are too young to do any truly useful forced labor. Later on, when they are bigger, we can send them into our filthy cities to pick up the trash scattered in the streets by others. Maybe those others will stand around and watch.

Summer Notes from Central Control

Try not to be alarmed by the computerish supplement that comes with this issue. THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN will never be

printed that way. We will use the computer only for addenda of various kinds. Our typesetter is getting older, but he isn't getting better, and we often want to say more than the dodderer can handle between one issue and the next.

The Amazing Blurb Contest is over at last. The winning entries will appear on the jacket of *The Leaning Tower of Babel, and Other Affronts*, which will itself appear in the middle of August. As soon as the Little, Browners send us the final list, we will write to the winners and ask permission to publish their names in the next issue.

We are proud of them, and of you all. We often fancy, and publicly contend, that our readers are a saving remnant of the kind of people Jefferson had in mind when he spoke of that "informed discretion" upon which our freedom must depend. We wish, of course, that there were more of you, but it doesn't really matter. You are enough.

Most of you are, however, too patient and polite. Our publishing schedule is, to be sure, uncertain, usually because of that typesetter, but the day must surely come when you should have the latest issue. Should the delay seem inordinate, even for us, should you succumb to every American's recurrent suspicion that postal workers have decided that it is just too much trouble to deliver *all* of the mail, or should you fear that our computer has obliterated you, write us at once, requiring justice. Our computer just doesn't make any mistakes, but neither will it correct any of ours. Of course, if you have moved without giving us your new address, we will perhaps allude to that fact, but we will still make up any back issues you have missed.

While looking back through the issue for April, 1984, please be so good as to read "Abraham" for "Lot" throughout. Thank you. What a blunder.

We remind all readers, and especially all new subscribers, that we *always* give not only permission but also approbation to any readers who want to xerox their copies and pass them around. You needn't even ask.

And we urge all readers to keep sending us the evidence on which our essays are always based. We never name our sources.

And we now say goodbye until September, which comes, this year, in August. Why not?

AND FURTHERMORE...

We have had some of our best letters ever in response to "The Atheist Child," which appeared in the April 1984 issue. They are important enough to drive us, a few months earlier than we had intended, to send out the first of a series (a *long* one, we hope) of occasional supplements "generated" (the only possible word) on our computer. (Or perhaps *via* our computer.)

Several readers made a similar point, which is worth quoting in at least two versions:

. . . an "atheist child" is *not* a prodigy; he simply has not been subjected to the training and pressure of sectarian cultists, of whatever denomination, with medieval, primitive, childish mythology.

I don't think you adhered to your usual persnickiness regarding exact meanings. I submit for your criticism the assertion that an atheist is not *something*; rather he is *not* something.

The distinction is a fine one, and worth a lot of thoughtful attention from anyone who wants to keep the mind in tune and the reason in frame. Nor is it simply a matter of the definition of a word. It calls for some clear understanding of the nature of the mental acts and conditions to which we want to point with that word. What, then, can we say of the mental acts and conditions of the "atheist," child or not? Are they intrinsically different, or different only in content, from the mental acts and conditions of the "theist" or the "progressivist," or, for that matter, of the "patriot," child or not?

The question reminds us of a phrase from the now obsolete *Book of Common Prayer*, an incomparable well of good English, what ever else it may be. There, some mental condition called "faith" is said to have something to do with "the substance of things unseen." In that phrase, the word "unseen" obviously does not mean, or does not mean *only*, inaccessible to the sight of the eye. "See" must be there intended as it is when we say, "I see what you mean," or, "When

at last they saw the truth, they decided not to die for that cause after all.”

So the theist, and by his own definition, we suppose, deems himself one who “sees” not only at *one* remove from the work of the eye, which is properly said of him who “sees” that the angles of a triangle must add up to one hundred and eighty degrees, but at *two* removes, at least. For he “sees” what cannot be shown *either* to the sight of the eye *or* to the “sight” by which we see what is so about triangles. If it *could* be, political and religious discord would be just about as common as bloody war over the nature of triangles.

So our question must be this: Where the theist claims to *see* something, does the atheist (a) see nothing? (b) see something else? (c) make no claim as to what he sees? or, (d) refrain from looking in that direction at all?

Both of the writers quoted above seem to suggest something very much like (d). “All children,” says the second of them, “start off as atheists. How could it be otherwise?” He asserts, and accurately, that our essay assumed either (a) or (b), and treated “atheism” as though it were the *content* of some supposed “seeing.” Thus it was that we questioned whether a child might have mastered such “thorny” content, for a reasoned demonstration of the existence of that “nothing” would be every bit as tough a job as for any “something.” And indeed, as most letter—writers held, if there simply *is* no content there, then there is nothing to master, and the mental *condition* of atheism, which requires no special mental *act*, is perfectly possible even in a child who has performed no mental acts at all.

That sounds to us very much like (d), the condition of not looking, or even of never having looked, in “that direction.” That is certainly a possible definition of atheism, but it seems, we must confess, of extraordinarily limited use. Far from helping us to understand certain acts and conditions of the mind, it doesn’t even permit us to distinguish between human beings and crocodiles, or, for that matter, between a child and a cucumber.

Furthermore, and this was certainly true of the father of “the atheist child,” those who call themselves atheists do not in fact speak of their own condition as though it were easily attainable by infants. They rather seem to suggest that there is some dignity in their position, and even merit.

For all that they may call atheism a neutral (and natural) state of the unconditioned mind, they find it nevertheless a *worthy* state. They often call themselves, in a phrase that is more appropriate than it seems at first, “confirmed” atheists.

Considering all of that, along with the fact that many confirmed atheists are more than ordinarily intellectual, we must suggest to our correspondents that they have not given themselves enough thought. There can be neither dignity nor merit nor worth where there is neither will nor choice, and no condition into which a person just happens to fall, whether by reason of infancy or any other accident, can be accorded either blame or praise. Nor can a person *be* confirmed, in any sense of the word, without having *become* confirmed, or convinced without having passed through, however passively, whatever mental acts and conditions *brought* him to conviction.

We have to conclude that *the* atheism to which atheists themselves lay claim is *not* the neutral condition of the unindoctrinated mind, but one that must be attained and that can therefore be promulgated, put forth and explicated for other minds. And it has been our experience that those who suppose themselves atheists are only slightly less reluctant than those who suppose themselves true believers to promulgate in others that condition which they suppose “right,” especially, and for obvious reasons, among their own children.

And what can it mean to say that an infant is *born* an atheist? How is that different from saying that an infant is born a socialist or a Republican? Such assertions are, of course, not *false*, for they permit no imaginable opposite assertions that would be *true*, but they are simply meaningless. They are, as scientists would put it, not falsifiable. In that, they are exactly like the assertion that angels are pink, or that God exists, or that God doesn’t exist. They are subject to the test neither of demonstration nor discourse, and, thus, nothing but matters of belief.

Surely, atheists hold the ideas they hold *not* because they deem them false, but because they deem them true. Nor do they speak of their ideas as if they were *not* ideas at all, but simply the absence of certain *false* ideas. Nor does it make any sense to hold that he who happens to be free of some false idea is thereby endowed with some

true idea; were that the case, the *real* color of angels would be known to anyone who has not succumbed to the false notion that they are pink.

And if the ideas that make up atheism could be seen to be true with the seeing of the eye, or with the seeing by which we can see what is true of triangles, there would be no quarrelling about them. So it must be that he who *sees* the truth of atheism, sees it at some greater remove, even as the commoner sort of believer sees some *other* “substance of things unseen.”

Where there is disagreement, and where neither the seeing of the eye nor the seeing of Reason can dispel it, we have made ourselves a delusion: The *belief*, for such it is, that of two contradictory notions, one must be true and the other false. There is one seeing by which we can see that wood is less dense than water, and another by which we can see that the angles of the triangle add up to one hundred and eighty degrees, but there is no seeing by which we can see that angels are either pink or not pink. Seeing is *not* believing—it is knowing. Believing is not seeing—it is believing, no matter *what* the substance of things unseen. Wovon man nicht sprechen Kann, darüber muß man schweigen, especially in the presence of children.

If atheists, and theists, and all other -ists of every sort, were to take Wittgenstein’s sound advice, and simply hold their tongues where no knowledge can be had, they would all find themselves, and decently leave the rest of us, and their children as well, in the seemly peace of condition (c). Where the substance of things unseeable is concerned, the life of dignity and worth is his alone who walks his own path and keeps his own counsel.

In our next computerized supplement, we will take up a knotty question raised by another correspondent. He wrote:

You came perilously close to an important, unsolved problem: How to prevent the telling of lies to children. Schopenhauer was right, [but] he didn’t say how to do what should be done.

“Perilously close” is good, but still not close enough. We will try to do better next time.



The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Eight, Number Five . . . September 1984



The Religious Life In America

If your request is related to religion, please provide evidence of your religious conviction, such as a letter from a church official, and a written explanation of the conflict between your religious beliefs and public education.

IT TAKES no special wisdom to see that wherever there is competition, there are peddlers of similar products. Breweries compete with each other, not with IBM. And when the products are in no important way to be distinguished from each other, the competition assumes not only a special ferocity, but also a special flavor. It becomes affective, seeking not the informed consent of the customer, but rather the approbation of his sentiments. The conflict between public education and religious, or even “religious” education is thus clarified.

Those agencies are different only in detail; in principle, not at all. For each, “education” is a certain road to a certain city, rather than a way of journeying and of founding a city. Each has its graven tablet of indisputable notions; each claims special knowledge and powers not available to the infidel; and each deems itself worthy of consideration and respect as a High Calling.

As you can see from the citation above, however, they do not compete on an equal footing. One of them is required by law to justify itself before the other, and the other is permitted by law to justify itself only in its own courts.

That passage comes from a form that you would have to fill in if you lived in Columbus, Ohio, and wanted to “educate” your children at home. One of the other questions asks what provision you have made for your child “to interact with other young people.” Another wants you to “explain the provisions that have been made for the continuous supervision of the pupil.”

Education is not something floating around *out there*, slices of which you may lop off here and there and graft onto your own substance. It is a way of the mind, not a content, and can not exist except *in* a mind. It is an absolutely inward and private condition. And all of that is also true of religion.

Thus it is that the schools would require of their competitors the very practices by which they so regularly prevent the ignition of education in children. That spark goes off only in a solitary, reflecting mind, only in a person who has stepped out of the noise of doing and into the stillness of considering. It is not as we read the page that education illuminates us; it is when we look up.

If we are kept busy interacting with others under continual supervision, however, only a happy, gifted few of us will ever look up.

We suppose, therefore, that people with religious designs will be happy to promise that, where interacting and continual supervision are concerned, they will do as much harm as the public schools. But we just can't guess how they deal with the abominations implied by the instruction cited above.

Maybe there is, somewhere in our land, an obsequious wimp who will comply with that outrageous requirement, who will humbly solicit and submit the testimony of a "church official" as to the existence of his religious convictions. Let's hope there aren't two. There is only one proper response that an American can make when an agency of government asks about his inner life. It is, in its only polite version: None of your damned business, buster.

There are, however and alas, more than two obsequious wimps.

This is the most calamitous consequence of what we have been trained to call "public education." Its very existence, maintained by laws beyond counting, has brought us gradually into an almost universal, obsequious wimpdom. We actually *believe* that an agency of government should be empowered both to enquire into and to modify the inner life of the individual mind. We not only wear that chain, but we wear it proudly, supposing it the special virtue of "a free country" that its children are required by law to submit their minds to the scrutiny of state workers whose job it is to do something to those minds. As in Albania. It is lucky for most of us, especially

those who use his name to justify such a system, that Jefferson is dead.

The makers of our Constitution were not a congregation of religious enthusiasts. If they protected religion from the intrusive propensities of all government and its functionaries, it was not because they loved churches and doctrines. It was because they loved freedom, and hated tyranny, especially tyranny over the mind. They knew that religion can not exist except in a mind. The amendment protects not churches, but individuals, minds. It affirms that the inner life of individuals is none of government's damned business.

Consider these words of Madison. He is speaking, in 1789, in the first Congress, against a grant of subsidy to certain farmers and fishermen, an act that would, he said, "subvert the very foundations, and transmute the very nature of the limited government established by the people of America."* He warns of consequences of the worst kind:

If Congress can employ money indefinitely to the general welfare, they may take the care of religion into their own hands; they may appoint teachers in every state, county, and parish, and pay them out of the public treasury; they may take into their own hands the education of children, establishing in like manner schools throughout the Union. . .

His chosen examples are remarkably interesting. How can we not find in his argument, which did prevail, an acknowledged abhorrence of the very idea of education by government? If school and state were not constitutionally separated by those who made the Republic, it must have been because they thought better of us than we have deserved.

So now we have what we deserve—legions of insolent twerps who can require of us an accounting of "regligious" beliefs, accompanied by written corroboration from an "official."

And of those twerps, we can require no accounting. They *are* official. They don't have to understand the meaning of what they do, which is, in any case, never the result of a mind's understanding, but only an implementation of

* Quoted in "Freedom and Democracy" a disturbing essay by John Hospers, in *The Freeman*, June 1984.

policy born of compromise. They can not be required to justify the idea that continual supervision and interacting with others are essential to education, because it isn't truly an idea whose reason and logic might be demonstrated. They do not have to form any thoughtful understanding of that bizarre belief before requiring individual citizens to act as though they shared it. All they have to know is that it is policy. Policy is to the state what doctrine is to the church. It doesn't *have* to make sense.

In our land there are many cults, many belief systems, many congregations united by a collective faith in the undemonstrable. Only one has a charter from the state, a license to take into custody all our children and do to their minds whatever its latest belief requires.

That, too, we deserve. Is there some way for us to stop deserving it?

Hunger in America

Egypt riseth up like a flood, and his waters are moved like the rivers and he saith, I will go up, and will cover the earth; I will destroy the city and the inhabitants thereof. § Come up, ye heroes; and rage, ye chariots; and let the mighty men come forth; the Ethiopians and the Libyans, that handle the shield; and the Lydians, that handle and bend the bow. § For this is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance, that he may avenge him of his adversaries; and the sword shall devour, and it shall be satiate and made drunk with their blood... § Go up into Gilead, and take balm, O virgin, the daughter of Egypt; in vain shalt thou use many medicines, for thou shalt not be cured. § The nations have heard of thy shame...

THE epigraph is, to be sure, unusual, and a bit long. Please read it anyway. Twice. Read it not with the reading of the schools, not as “a receiver of a communication,” but as a thoughtful inquirer into the meaning of what is said, as one who intends to say something *about* what is said.

Read it slowly, as you would read a gnarled sonnet of Donne, moving your lips the while. Listen. Discover its voice and its tone. Judge the effects of diction, its rhythms, its curt images and its metaphors. Pronounce it, at last, not right or wrong, which is useful only with regard to “a

communication,” but good or bad, either well-wrought or ill. Consider how, if there were going to be a test, you could justify your verdict. Do all of that now, and do it well, for there *is* going to be a test—every day of your life, and what follows is the dreadful tale of a man who failed it. So take your time. We can wait.

Good. All of that has made you an understander, not just a receiver.

What understanding have you of the word “medicines”? What sorts of “medicines” does *he* have in mind who speaks those words? Is he thinking of such things as antibiotics and decongestants, or even some imaginable ancient equivalents?

In what tone and with what intent does he say those words? Are they a taunting rebuke to that “daughter of Egypt,” assuring her that she has no hope at all of evading the just consequences of her deeds: or are they a bit of helpful advice on health-care?

Or can it be that the bloody aggressions of Egypt have nothing to do with the case? Did the speaker, all in the midst of his imprecations against the trouble-makers of a turbulent time, take a little time off to issue a commandment to *us*? When he says, “In vain shalt thou use many medicines, for thou shalt not be cured,” is he ordering us, or any one at all, to refrain utterly from all medical knowledge and practice?

If that last is what you have concluded from your reading of the cited passage, then you are utterly illiterate. You can not read. It matters not at all that you know the letters and the words.

Consider now the plight of a man who knows the letters and the words, but who can not read at all. Because he can not read at all, and because he imagines that he can, he was found guilty of certain criminal acts related to the death of his son.

Bill Barnhart's child died of hunger at the age of two and a half. For five months, what nourishment the boy had been able to swallow was gobbled up by the tumor that was growing in his belly. The child shriveled and the tumor prospered, until its greed undid them both. After a meager last supper, a few dry Cheerios and a sip of grape juice, host and guest died quietly together.

Barnhart, along with his wife, was eventually convicted of endangering the life of a child, and

involuntary manslaughter. He can not, for the life of him, understand why.

He is as much aggrieved as grieved. He understands the passage that you have so carefully read, along with a few carefully selected other passages that he can not read, as God's commandment to him to keep sick children away from doctors.

"I did nothing wrong," he said. "My conscience doesn't bother me."

That, we do believe. Conscience is a high wall of scrawled graffiti where the world can write what it pleases, a random anthology of pet notions, unexamined sentiments, and popular slogans remarkable chiefly for their vagueness. Conscience stands always in need of editing, a job that can't be done except through thoughtful reading of the scrawls.

But *something* bothers Barnhart. He is baffled and vexed, all unable to account for his suffering. He wonders why not one member of the jury was willing to 'stand up for God's rights,' in which notion he sees neither the absurdity nor the irony. In a speech whose devastating and utterly unintended power makes him sound like a character in a play by Arthur Miller, he points out the very passage cited above, and says to a reporter:

I want you to read that and see what you expect somebody to take out of that there. I'd like you to tell me what your interpretation is. I'd like you to study the whole thing out.*

How long would it take to sit down with Bill Barnhart to study the whole thing out? That is exactly what he needs: the whole thing, the whole art and power of language and thought.

Literacy is not a knack. It is a moral condition. The ability to read attentively, reflectively, and judiciously is also the ability to be attentive, reflective, and judicious. It is not an optional adornment for just and sane living. It is a necessity. It is *the* necessity. It is not a variety or portion of education. It *is* education. It is the whole thing, the wholesome nourishment of the mind, by which it may grow strong enough to be the master of the will and not its slave, the judge

* The whole story is told by Michael E. Ruane in *The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine* of June 17, 1984. That issue made observance of Fathers' Day as well.

of desire and not its procurer, the censor of sentiment and not its tool, and the inquisitor of belief, not its flack. It is our only path to whatever wisdom we can have, which is our only path to whatever goodness we can know, which is our only path to whatever happiness we can enjoy.

Bill Barnhart is not a happy man. His "faith," which is every bit as involuntary as his manslaughter, has not made him whole. He taketh no balm in Gilead. In vain shall he use many medicines, for he shall not be cured. Hunger is eating him up. All that might nourish him is straight-way devoured by the tumor that lives in his belly.

The Barnharts of our time, by the millions, live by the law of the belly. The belly was once believed to be the origin and dwelling place of impulse and appetite, the nettles and whips of our nature least susceptible to the governance of Reason. Orwell saluted the appropriateness of that metaphor in "bellyfeel," the mindless and ardent loyalty of the "true believer," and we acknowledge it when we have "gut feelings."

As to the presence of gut feelings, there is no disputation. We can not doubt Barnhart's word when he says, "We feel that God wrote this Bible." Although a thoughtful person would have said "*I* feel," recognizing that as to the feelings of others all evidence is hearsay, and acknowledging the possibility that Justin probably had no feelings one way or the other in this crucial matter, we nevertheless do believe that Barnhart does believe that he feels what he says he feels.

And so do we all.

When he justifies his acts by his feelings, Barnhart stands where we all stand, often, every day. It is the Occasion of Education. All he needs is a true teacher to stay him a while.

In this case, a true teacher would probably start out by quoting from *Isaiah*: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord." And he will leave aside until later, much later, the rest of the verse. He will not quarrel as to the author of the Bible, for it truly doesn't matter. He would urge only that if God had written a book, it would turn out to be a very fine book indeed. Better than anything ever done by Homer, or Dante, or Milton. Better than Shakespeare, far better. Whatever excellencies of language and thought we find in the countless books by the legions of the lesser, shall we not find in ultimate perfection

in the one perfect book of the greater? Where the many plumb deepness beyond deepness, shall the one not leave us glimpses of the abyss? If the simple song of a poet can dwell forever in the mind, arising and living again and again, shining each time with new, undreamed of light, shall we knock off a line of *Jeremiah* and say, “That’s that”?

Just now, of course, none of that would mean anything to Barnhart. He has been to school, which is why he can not read. He knows nothing of the excellencies of language and thought, for no one could show them to him. He knows nothing of deepness in great authors, for he hasn’t read them. The words of poets do not arise and live in his mind, and even the words by which he lives and requires helpless children to live—or to die, as luck would have it—even the words he calls “God’s” are dead slogans, bones that can not live.

Fundamental literalism is not only a sickness of religion; it is a sickness of the mind. It is essentially a Basic Minimum Competence writ large and applied indiscriminately to all supposed human “problems”—anything from filling out an application for a driving license to distinguishing the worthy from the unworthy. Among its components, two are essential. One is a blindness to metaphor, and the other is the nourishment of the tumor that lives in the belly, the feeling that feeling is knowing. Out of the notion that communication is the purpose of language, the schools provide the first, and out of the feeling that education is the result of “adjustment” in “the affective domain,” the schools provide the second. In fact, though they haven’t the wit to figure it out, the simpleton religionists have no better friends than the simpleton educationists, who turn out, yearly, millions of empty children, prepared not for life, but only for the unexamined life, and so terribly hungry that they will swallow anything.

They will take no balm. In vain will they gobble up dry Cheerios and guzzle down grape juice, for they will never be nourished.

We Toot a Salute! and Brief Notes

THREE long-time readers and partisans have been chosen as the winners of the Amazing Blurp

Contest. While we did not do the choosing, we applaud it vigorously.

We have a rule against giving out the names of our readers. However, since these three can be found on the dust jacket of *The Leaning Tower of Babel*, we don’t mind telling you that they are Lois DeBaKey, Roy Meador, and Bob Verdun. We salute them.

BY NOW, the winners will have their copies of the book, which is a pretty fat collection of pieces from our first seven years. But if you want your own copy, you’ll have to go to your local book market where the teenager in charge will tell you that the book has been out of print for years. Then you can go home and order it from Readers Express at 1-800-852-5000. They take plastic, and they carry also *The Graves of Academe*, but we’d feel better if they had an apostrophe.

MANY of our readers would enjoy “Editor’s Revenge,” an always instructive and often hilarious newsletter of bent and broken English. Write for a sample to PO Box 805, Morrisville, NJ 07960.

ALVARADO is gone. He was, you may recall, the “chancellor” of all government schools in New York City, and a man whose mental powers we have occasionally examined. About his dismissal, which was not related to his acknowledged prowess as an “educator,” of course, we know only one interesting fact:

Alvarado’s troubles arose from his habit of borrowing money from ‘subordinates.’ At one point in the hassle he admitted that, while he had done nothing wrong, some of his doings might be perceived as wrong by those who lacked a sufficient appreciation of a culture other than their own.

Alvarado has been replaced by a certain Quinones. About Quinones we know only one interesting fact:

On the day he became chancellor, he cheerily announced that his horoscope was auspicious for the “finalizing of contracts.” He is a Libra.

*Neither can his mind be thought to be in tune,
whose words do jarre; nor his reason in frame,
whose sentence is preposterous.*

The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Eight, Number Six . . . October 1984

The Governor's Mouth

THE typographical monstrosity that you see below is a pretty accurate replica of a placard that can be seen in hundreds of "designated areas" where the official business of the great state of New Jersey is presumed to be done. The governor who sends before his face that ill-printed pronouncement of his inscrutable policy is a politician named Kean (*not* pronounced *keen*).



The placard is as ugly as it is pretentious and absurd, and therefore in no way unusual. Nor did the reader who sent it to us suppose it a special case worthy of our keenest critical efforts. He saw it for what it is—the routine inanity of regular civic discourse, in which no person in particular speaks to any person in general. It is that mode of discourse in which STOP signs are written, and which is most likely to make sense when restricted to objective statements that can be expressed in one word. MEN, for example, or TOILET.

The moral significance of language derives from the fact that only a *person* can speak it, and from the possibility that a person can also choose what to say. Infants and maniacs can not be held accountable for their words, but the rest of us can, and should. Some of us, most especially those who put themselves forth as competent to govern

others, must be held absolutely accountable for what they say. When a governor of others speaks inanelly, or at random, or out of sentiments, beliefs, or appetites by which he himself is governed, he at once proves himself unfit to govern others. The ability to govern others can not exist except as a special case of the ability to govern, and that ability can hardly be attributed to him who can not govern his own mouth. Teachers and parents, along with politicians and clerics, are passionately reluctant to receive the truth of that principle, which is why they do more harm than any other classes of our society.

But the makers of our republic were fully aware of that truth. Obedient to it, they built into our constitution the idea of government by law, not by men, lest the health of the republic be left to depend on the very unlikely appearance among us of great hosts of men wise enough to govern both themselves and others.

They knew the difference between ruling, whose devices are power and persuasion, and whose license is the efficacy of power and persuasion, and governing, whose device is principle, and whose license is the rational consent of the governed. For us, much to our credit but much to our peril, they chose governing.

That choice, however, left us the obligation of providing for, and in, ourselves the moral force that makes rule seem much better than government. When an ox-cart driver in old Babylon came to a stop sign, he was in no doubt as to whose word had come unto him. Of any placard in any government office, the citizens of Nineveh could truly have said that the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. They could also have drawn useful conclusions from those words. If the words were orderly and thoughtful, so too the ruler whose words they were. If the words were garbled and inane, then the unfortunate subjects of the mouth that spoke them would at least be able to identify the imbecile into whose clutches they had fallen.

Since we, unlike the Babylonians, might actually be able to do some thing about him, it is an especially unfortunate consequence of our polity that we can *not* identify the imbecile who speaks inanity to us from the seat of government. He has no name of his own, no face, no mind, only a mouth.

Imagine that some True King, wise and just, a very Arthur, should come to reign over us. Imagine also that he asks, of that silly sign:

Whose words are these? Who of my stewards thinks so little of my people that he sets their minds at naught and speaks as though there were no need to make sense when addressing them? Is there some councilor of mine who lightly tolerates Unreason, in whose disorderly encampment Wisdom and Justice will not rest? Is there an officer of this realm who supposes this public display of absurdity a trivial matter, unworthy of his lofty (and costly) attention, supposing himself able to be faithful in the large without having been faithful in the small?

To the first question, everyone from the governor to the printer will be able to say, Those are not *my* words. Our revision of the Founding Fathers' government not by men has brought us into a polity in which millions have power to rule, and none the obligation to govern. As to what the Governor of New Jersey would have to say for himself in reply to the King's other questions, it is instructive to wonder.

He sits in a crooked chair, and not in a posture out of which to repudiate official displays of absurdity. He is at once, for example, the "governor" of a tremendous "educational" system and of a tremendous gambling game. If he were to lead the former in an assault upon absurdity and unreason, he would eventually, but surely, visit upon the latter a devastating shortage of superstitious suckers.

He is also the chief executive officer of an impersonal, powerful entity that puts itself forth as fit and able to in form and direct the inner life of the mind in all our children, but that either can't or won't make sense in so simple a thing as a No Smoking sign. If you can not see the relation between those things, you show how effective, and convenient, government "education" can be. Even blind mouths eat.

It is true that when we say "ammendment," what we mean is "amendment." But when we say "reglious," we mean "reglious." Who supposes otherwise should read again the small print below the title.

On Account of Because

Because of the way readability formulas operate, you won't find the word 'because' in standard K to 8 text series,

THOSE are the words, presumably accurate, and certainly official, of one Harriet Bernstein, who works for the Council of Chief State School Officers. We found them in a *New York Times* article about the forthcoming textbook revolution, in which those miscreants who committed the old abominations will be given the power to commit the new ones.

Consider, for a mild and (at first) amusing example, the fact that elementary school textbooks in California are prohibited from making any reference to birthday parties. If you have to ask why, you are negligently ignorant of the fact that government schools are the primary agents of government propaganda. At least for now, government is touchingly attentive to our health. Children's birthday parties are hazardous to the health of children. They foster the eating of cake and ice cream. Cake and ice cream are junk foods. Wise and kindly government could hardly be a party to *that* sort of party, now could it?

Nor could it, obviously, be a party to that vexation of heart and mind which might befall any child under the age of thirteen or so who happens to encounter, and in an officially approved publication, no less, the arcane and difficult word, "because."

Now if you are a typical citizen of our republic, utterly ignorant of how its schools came to be what they are, and at least mildly bemused by the unlikely exclusion of "because," you may well murmur to yourself:

Goodness gracious me oh my. What a curious arrangement. It must make it extraordinarily difficult to describe or explain *anything* in those textbooks. And pretty hard to *read* them, come to think of it. How could such a silly thing have happened in the first place? Surely no one in his right mind, and especially not an *educator*, would have *wanted* the children's textbooks so distorted and disabled. There must have been a slip-up somewhere. An oversight. Bureaucracies are like that. Maybe a little error, and one thing leads to another. Well, not to worry. Thank goodness we

have that Harriet Bernstein and all those other educators quoted right here in the *Times*. How smart they were to discover all that textbook nonsense, and how lucky we are to have them. They'll soon have everything put to rights.

And if such were your ruminations, you would be led further astray by the weird and unsettling conclusion of the *Times* article. It ends, on what some editor probably thought an optimistic note, by quoting Richard B Anderson, who does not deny that he is the director of the Center for the Study of Reading at a branch of the University of Illinois:

“You can't really even say that there is a debate going on, because a debate implies that there are two sides. I dare you to find a coherent defender of the status quo.”

Life in the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Educationism. On Monday, the loudspeaker awakens you with an announcement from The Administrators that, under their wise and kindly guidance, the production of bubble gum has reached the highest level in all our glorious history. And on Tuesday, the loudspeaker trumpets the joyful news that The Wise and Kindly Administrators have given ear to the piteous pleas of the People, that they are as one in understanding and resolve, that they will straightway put in order the chaos created by thousands of enemy agents, who seem to have slipped away over the border just last night, and that the Great Bubble Gum Famine will soon, very soon, be gone. And forgotten. Forgotten. Yes. Indeed, we must all do our duty as citizens, and serve the Common Good, by forgetting the whole business. Right now.

Between the devotees of Mnemosyne and the drinkers of Lethe, there is perpetual but very unusual warfare. Only the former fight, and only the latter win. Memory struggles uphill. The water of forgetfulness flows easily and naturally by the shortest path to the lowest place. If the rememberers overcome the forgetters today with the keen edge of the past, it is nothing. Tomorrow the forgetters will forget, and their wounds will be healed.

Harriet Bernstein and Richard B. Anderson were not actually born yesterday. They just talk that way. They do not remember yesterday. They do not remember that where there is today “no debate” about taking nonsense out of the

textbooks, there was yesterday “no debate” about putting that same nonsense into the textbooks.

They do not remember that it was they, in humanistic solidarity with the whole tribe of junk educationism, in which there is *always* “no debate,” who panted to program the sentiments and attitudes of children, and even to protect them against the insidious allure of ice cream and cake. They do not remember that it was they, not agents of the enemy, not the long-departed Old Ones, not even the angry gods, but they, and they alone, who sat on committees, and implemented parameters, and finalized positions, and thereupon decided to take the because out of the books.

We doubt they'll put it back. They need a whole generation of Americans who will never even think of because.

All the Glib Examinees

As I imagine you have found, the more educated people are, the worse they write, flagrantly violating the basic rules of clarity, conciseness, and simplicity.

His education had been neither scientific nor classical—merely “Modern.” The severities both of abstraction and of high human tradition had passed him by; and he had neither peasant shrewdness nor aristocratic honor to help him. He was a man of straw, a glib examinee in subjects that require no exact knowledge.

THE first epigraph is from what we call “one of those letters.” They come from all sorts of folk, infinitive fanatics, plain English preachers, and more and more often, as in this case, from paid practitioners of “communications consulting,” a waxing tribe.

Their letters are always laudatory, saluting us as noble defenders of the purity of the tongue, and implacable enemies of such startling opponents as “the insipid infidel of incorrect English.” Always, they remind us of our Founder's last words. “When the wise disapprove,” he said, “that's bad; when fools applaud, that's worse.”

Our inevitable chagrin is mitigated, however, by the obvious fact that most of these

correspondents have no knowledge of what we have “found,” and serenely presume, like the one quoted above, to “imagine” that we must have found exactly what they imagine that they have found. Vain imaginings. We have found no truth or worth at all in the pat and popular formula put forth by our correspondent as though it were—well, of course!—the one and simple secret of “good” writing.* We have rather found that such formulas depend on—and promulgate—misunderstandings about both writing and education, misunderstandings so gross and corrosive that they are best called what they truly are: corruptions.

Those supposed “basic rules of clarity, conciseness, and simplicity” must lead us to conclude that the best writing possible is what we find inscribed on faucets and on the doors of public toilets. Those are suitable not for the art of writing, but for the knack of communicating, which is the least and simplest of the uses of writing, and which is often best accomplished without any writing at all, and frequently without any language at all.

He who would learn to “write” for the sake of communication needs to master a technology no different in principle from that of the carpenter or the die-maker. Its techniques do not have to be discovered and tested by logic and thoughtful reflection. They are known. They can be listed, learned, and practiced. And in that way, it can be mastered, like any other knack, through the diligent accumulation of experience. It isn’t a cinch, any more than good carpentry, and in some it may be precluded by temperament, sloth, or stupidity, which will equally preclude good carpentry, but it can be achieved. By millions.

* At nearby Glassboro State College, a government training institution, there is a certain Frank Grazian, a communicator. He, too, has discovered a one and simple secret of good writing. Punchy verbs.

According to a news flash from *Communication Briefing*, Grazian has definitively answered an ancient and vexing question, and, in the same blow, made needless all future literary criticism. “Good writers, he found, use from two to four punchy verbs per 100 words.”

As examples of punchy verbs, he provides “pry,” “snare,” and “banish.” On page 2, when he needs more examples, he comes up with “pry,” “snare,” “strike,” and “banish.”

In exactly the same way, millions could learn to keep at bay “the insipid infidel of incorrect English.” That too is a knack, whose techniques can be listed, learned, and practiced.

Nevertheless, the land sags under the weight of communication consultants who make livings because the school people, whether out of temperament, sloth, or stupidity, have not mastered or learned to teach even the rudiments of those readily accessible knacks. And then, insult heaped on injury, the consultants have the brass to say that the worst writers are those who are too educated.

Too educated. What an interesting idea. And what a popular one, too.

We hear it everywhere, and most regularly from the educationists, among whom it is an article of belief that “education,” which they do approve, of course, has the unhappy side-effect of inhibiting the inculcation of certain “human” attributes that they approve a whole lot more.

What understanding of “education” must he have, who can suppose that it disables the mind, making it less capable than an uneducated mind of distinguishing between the clear and the obscure, the concise and the approximate, the simple and the complicated? Is education some distortion of the mind’s propensity to put itself in order? Who *are* those strange people cited by our correspondent, and why would anyone suppose such disorderly minds ‘educated’ at all?

The answer, of course, is not far to seek. It is given in the second epigraph, which is from *That Hideous Strength*, a strange novel by C. S. Lewis.

We all suffer from a debilitating delusion. It is the belief, fostered by the schools, that schooling and education are essentially related. That is false. They are accidentally related, which is to say that education is a result of schooling just as certainly as it is the result of skiing. In the course of either diversion, someone may, of course, be led into the rational ordering of knowledge and the thoughtful consideration of meaning, but it is not on the list of planned activities.

In the tradition out of which C. S. Lewis wrote, academics not only admitted the accidental relationship of schooling to education; they affirmed it. They put themselves forth not as educating their students, for educating is not something that one person can do to another, but only as preparing their minds for the educating

that they might someday accomplish by and in themselves. That the man described above is uneducated is barely worth mentioning. He is, in fact, and all his diplomas notwithstanding, not even prepared for education. And so it is with our correspondent's clients, "the more educated people" who just can't learn to make sense.

We know them well. They are all the glib examinees. They flourish diplomas in all the trendy undisciplines, unsubjects like education, marketing, urban studies, recreation counseling, personnel administration, and all the pullulating offspring of the two great mothers of armed inexactitude sociology and psychology.

In such "fields," (also known—and why not?—as "areas," or "spheres," or "arenas"), the glib practitioner can natter endlessly, freely adducing the unfalsifiable in support of the unverifiable. His "science" empowers him confidently to predict that what will happen will happen, unless, for one reason or another, it doesn't, in which case something else may or may not happen, just as he predicted. His "knowledge" is of such an unusual nature that the next practitioner down the hall, who just happens to be testifying for the other side, can 'know' exactly the opposite. His language is clouded by dark jargon and undefinable terms, lest he, and his colleague down the hall be exposed as charlatans, pretending to knowledge where none can be had, in the vagaries of the human heart, and to measurement where there are no units, in the mysteries of man's estate. Clarity, simplicity, and precision would destroy his racket utterly and drive him into the streets, to seek, in vain, the honest labor of which his empty and pretentious schooling has made him absolutely incapable.

And then some silly twit of a communications consultant writes, loftily to inform us that the worst writers are the "more educated," which is just what all the glib examinees are trained to say to show proficiency in the high calling of communication consulting.

*Neither can his mind be thought to be in tune,
whose words do jarre; nor his reason in frame,
whose sentence is preposterous.*



The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Eight, Number Seven . . . November 1984



The Disappearance of Everybody

Enclosed is my personal resume for your review and consideration for a position which may be available at the present time or in the foreseeable future.

Throughout my successful management career, I have always strived to excel and to utilize initiative and resourcefulness to improve efficiency and quality control.

I have always been cited for superior interpersonal skills and my ability to interface at all management levels.

I ask only the opportunity to interview with your very fine organization and further present my diverse professional and personal attributes.

WHAT you see above is a perfect realization of a lofty aspiration, one of the Great Goals of the great American school industry, the elusive, yet obviously possible, Letter of Application for a Job. Who says our schools can't teach writing?

And, though you may have guessed otherwise, thinking it just a sample from a communicationist manual of swell suggestions, that letter was actually "written," in a certain sense of the word, by a living "person," in a certain sense of the word.

The letter is 'written' in the sense of the word that we have in mind when we notice "Pepsi-Cola" written with smoke in the sky. In that same sense, we also say that a policeman writes parking tickets, and that the man who sells newspapers also writes numbers. These examples, however, seem to impel a further distinction, for the three latter examples have a virtue not to be found in the first. It is much to the credit of skywriters, cops, and numbers runners, that they

do not pretend, in writing, that they speak for themselves. Their written works, therefore, show a refreshing absence of intent to deceive. In the case of the Letter of Application for a Job, the determination of intent is somewhat more vexed.

If we are to judge of intention, we have to find an intender. Wind and rain can not intend. Neither OPEC nor the World Council of Churches can intend. Only a *person* can intend, and the person who may be lurking in the robotic machinery of that letter is difficult to make out.

He is there, however. If you look very carefully, you'll just be able to make him out, wild-eyed, a little desperate, peeking out from behind "strived," which is almost certainly the only thing in the whole letter of which a wife might conceivably say, "That's my Bill." While not truly a redeeming virtue, and surely not a special and unexpected beauty, like the mark of the potter's thumb, that discordant little gaucherie is at least a glimmer of life, human life, the tiny spark given off only by a *person*.

It is, however, a spark that the writer, had he known enough to see it, would have stamped out immediately. It appeared in the first place, of course, out of the same automatic reflex that replaces "use" with "utilize" and "get along" with "interface." Such substitutions of the approximate for the exact are thought classy not only in educationism, but also in educationism's lustiest hybrid offspring, businessism. Had our "writer" known just a little bit more, he would have done, strangely enough, just a little bit worse. "Striven" would not really improve his work. It would pile pomposity on preposterousness, and, far more important, although not to the writer, it would wipe out the mark of the human person. We would then hear in his letter nothing but that unsettling, alien voice that more and more officiously addresses us.

From the halls of government and schooling, from the media of every sort and stripe, from our very clocks and automobiles, we hear (and obey) the one and only Great Voice of our time, the voice of no one in particular speaking to anyone in general. It is speech without mind and unamenable to discourse, talk in which we are not truly addressed, but only "accessed."

And so it must be, apparently, in anything much larger than a village ruled by a wise and virtuous chief whose word is truly *his* word. We

do have to listen to the voice of no one in particular, for it is that voice that also tells us to stop at certain corners and to close cover before striking, but we do not have to love it. The people who taught "writing" to the poor fellow cited above, and whose teaching has shaped and fenced the life of the mind in almost everyone who lives in this land, who made of "education" a disorderly concoction of childishly transparent adjustment and pitifully ineffective training—long ago they learned to love the voice of no one in particular. They revere and imitate that voice, and speak in it, to themselves, to their students, to all of us.

That is why nothing can be done about what is done in schools. There is no doer there, no responsible person who might, impelled by a fit of rational inquiry, actually *choose* to do something else. All that the schoolers believe, or feel, or even appreciate, is at the behest of no one in particular. Who tells them that believing and feeling, and even appreciating, are worthier than mere knowledge, which is nothing but the least of the merely cognitive skills? No one in particular. Who tests such propositions, and can show the reason of them to any rational mind? No one in particular.

It is by education, not schooling, that a human creature becomes *this person*. The one, existence, is given. The other, essence, must be made. It must be made out of the consideration of the self, the knowledge of the self, the judgment of the self, and the shaping of the self. Such acts are all works of the mind, and are better or worse performed to that degree in which the mind has knowledge and control of its own works and laws. Since the mind seems to seek, by its own nature, some grasp of itself, the propensity for education can not be easily disabled, and education itself, in at least some degree, can be prevented only with great difficulty.

But we have found out the trick of doing it. We call it "education."

The applicant quoted above shows us what we mean by the "product of the schools." A product, he is. A plug in search of a socket. A dutiful citizen, utilizing initiative, interfacing at levels, competing with the Japanese.

He is the Final Solution to the discomforts of the schoolers: anyone in general who is no one in particular.

Compassion in California

An act relating to self-esteem, and making an appropriation therefrom.

SECTION 1. The Legislature finds the following:

A. Most individual behavior is motivated by self-perception and self-image. Increased self-esteem tends to make people become more achievement-oriented, confident, creative, productive, and successful, which in turn translates into a society which is healthier, safer, more productive, and less costly.

B. Low self-esteem can have a wide-ranging influence on individual conduct, the costs of which in both human and societal terms are manifested in a number of ways, many of which convert into significant expenditures of state moneys. These human costs and costs to government can be reduced by raising the self-esteem level of our citizenry.

THE EDUCATIONISTS who make our schools what they are, are delighted to remind us, when the heat is on, that schools are Reflections of Society as a Whole. If Society is disorderly and debauched, how can schools be otherwise? When they want more respect and money, they put themselves forth as the shapers of Society as a Whole. In both assertions, they are correct, and if their minds were capable of considering both facts at the same time, they might someday learn to distinguish between what is correct and what is right.

The passage quoted above comes from California State Assembly Bill 3691, which has been passed in that house and now awaits the judgment of the senate. It will probably be come law. There are few politicians who want to be recorded as enemies of self-esteem, and even fewer who require of the sponsor of such a bill a thorough and reasoned explication of the exact nature of self-esteem, so that it might be distinguished from certain remarkably similar but less attractive sentiments, vainglory, arrogance, self-indulgence, impudence, egotism, vanity, for instance, to say nothing of the colossal brass out of which a pack of pols will undertake to reprogram the inner life of what it is condescendingly pleased to call "our citizenry."

Bill 3691 offers no explication of self-esteem. It calls for the establishment of a Commission to

Study the Causal Relationship Between Self-Esteem, Personal Responsibility, and Social Problems, hut an explication of self-esteem will be of no interest to the trendy change-agents who will sit on that commission. They will all be educationists or something-ists, self-esteeming practitioners of popular non-disciplines. Such people have no time for mere rationality; *their* work is in the *real* world.

For the purposes of Bill 3691, and of its sponsor. one John Vasconcellos, self-esteem is sufficiently understood as that sentiment which is insufficiently harbored by the unfortunate victims of Society as a Whole who are forced to bring upon themselves, *and* upon Society as a Whole, all of the following woes:

(1) Increased aggressiveness and violent behavior...

(2) Low academic achievement levels, preventing individuals from competing for jobs...

(3) Discrimination, including racial, sexual, age, & other prejudices, which many people use to compensate for their own feelings of low self-worth...

(4) Dramatically increased rate of teenage pregnancies clue to a lack of purpose...

(5) Hierarchical or authoritarian economic & political organizations...

(6) Increasing drug and alcohol abuse due to a person not feeling good about, or valuing, his or her natural state.

There was a time when a twelve-year-old schoolboy with only the first rudiments of true education would have laughed himself into a spasm of retching over the preposterous illogic of that list and of the argument out of which it is derived. Now, however, we are unable to laugh, for it is out of such thinking, and by such thinkers, that Law is made in our land, a land founded, and the only land ever so founded, on rational principles, and out of the knowledge—not the belief, not the feeling, not the wish, but the clear knowledge—that man is capable of Reason.

Now, in Jefferson's mantle, many sizes too big, a Vasconcellos comes before his learned colleagues to warn them that a spectre is haunting California. Low self-esteem is causing all the

drinking and drugging that low self-esteem causes. The learned colleagues nod sagely. The Vasconcellos recites the litany of woes that could sometimes befall some people under some circumstances as a result of low self-esteem. The learned colleagues decide to bestow three quarters of a million of somebody else's dollars on certain members of the self-esteem business who have already asserted, without rational explication, exactly what the Vasconcellos asserts, without rational explication.

We have been wrong. We have held that School is an agency and creature of Government. Not so. As the water, drop by drop, wears away the hardest stone, so, Vasconcellos by Vasconcellos, School infiltrates and informs whatever we call Government. The master comes at last to serve his slave.

It is interesting, but not of the first importance, that the Great Crusade for Enhanced Self-esteem has been a darling obsession of educationists for many decades. More important is the fact that when Government becomes an agency of School, it must justify all its acts by reference to emotion, not reason, and by a scrupulous neglect of all the laws of thought.

Although you would never guess it from the practice of the teacher academies, or the California legislature, propositions can be tested. Bill 3691 depends upon a proposition in this form: There is a certain condition, A, that causes bad results, B. It takes no great powers of formal logic to test that proposition. What it does take, however, is a kind of curiosity now deemed anti-social, and rigorously discouraged by School and Government. It is the curiosity out of which one asks: Should I believe what I do believe? Can I find out?

Armed with that curiosity, a Vasconcellos, entirely within himself, and without even sending out a questionnaire, could have conducted a very interesting investigation:

I do, I do believe that insufficient self-esteem brings many and various bad consequences, that A causes B. In believing that, do I have to believe some other things as well?

Do I believe, for instance, that A is the only cause of B, that it is low self-esteem alone to which we owe all the miseries and disorders of the human condition? Seems unlikely, and both

experience and introspection, combined with a little information, urge, at least, consideration of some other possible causes. Pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth do come to mind, but they're hardly fit matters for legislation, and surely not susceptible to scientific identification and measurement, like lack of self-esteem. (I forget exactly who told me that. One of the low self-esteem experts. He had the figures.) Still, it would be interesting to know: Out of a hundred inconvenient teenage pregnancies, are *some* caused by lust rather than low self-esteem? Could we ever know which? Could it be that low self-esteem *causes* a propensity for habitual self-indulgence? Could it be the other way around? Or both? Or neither? How much confidence is due to the expert who comes right out with glib answers to such questions? What do his figures mean?

And now that I've come to think of "the other way around," should I not consider the possibility that at least *some* B is caused by *too much* self-esteem? History provides a long list of destructive monsters brimming over with self-esteem. And then there are the jerks. Every jerk I know has more self-esteem than Socrates, who, come to think of it, seemed to find more worth in self-doubt. And all the nuts and cranks, the faddists and believers, every one of them right, right, right! Especially vegetarians.

And then there's the street punk, cocky swaggerer, sticker-up of candy stores, provider of pregnancies, scornor of all trades. Do I *really* believe all those guidance counsellors? Does he really need *more* self-esteem? And if he suffers from poor self-image, isn't that rather to be applauded than deplored? Does it not suggest at least a glimmer of self-knowledge, perhaps his only virtue, and also, perhaps, a virtue that might grow by nourishment?

Can self-knowledge be nourished by self-esteem? Is there some proper marriage of the two, some natural union? Have I not often had nasty attacks of self-knowledge, and seen myself among the jerks, put there, furthermore, by a nasty attack of unexamined self-esteem? Is it not when self-esteem leads and self-knowledge lags behind that I am in the greatest danger of doing or saying what will be foolish or hurtful? But when self-esteem is decently governed by self-knowledge, am I not the less likely to play the fool or the knave?

On the other hand, can self-esteem be nourished by self-knowledge?

Does my own self-esteem quotient rise or fall when I notice that I have been a colossal jerk? Does it not do both? Bad as it is to be a jerk, it is surely good to know that I am being a jerk, for how else can I avoid being a jerk in the future?

Maybe I ought to be proposing an entirely different bill, one that would promote self-knowledge rather than self-esteem. Can that be done? I'll ask that guy who has all the figures, of course, but I do suspect that no one can provide self-knowledge for somebody else. When somebody tells me that I'm a jerk, it doesn't really help at all unless I also have some way of knowing whether or not he's right.

Hmm. There's an interesting idea. A way of knowing. Is there a way of knowing in which one person actually can instruct another? Wouldn't such instruction be more beneficial to all those poor down-and-outers—and to anyone else, for that matter—than instruction in self-esteem?

And now that I've said the words, it occurs to me that there is something more than just a little bit fishy about the thought of 'instruction' in self-esteem. People do butter each other up, that's for sure, and even in the California legislature, but that's not exactly an exercise in instruction. It works all the better, in fact, and in this legislature it might even save you a bust in the nose, when the victim remains totally uninstructed.

So. That must be why those self-esteem boosters wanted me to use all their funny language in my bill. It doesn't call for any instructing, and it doesn't say a single word about knowing. What it does say—and I'm about to have a nasty attack of self-knowledge, I suspect—is that a pack of those same self-esteem boosters should be hired at the taxpayers' expense to cook up some "ways in which government and its institutions can be more conducive to the development & perpetuation of self-esteem."

Holy cow. Perpetual self-esteem all around. On the house. Sort of. What could I have had in mind? What on earth could an "institution of government" *do* to "develop and perpetuate" self-esteem? Can it be the business of government to set up a Department of Flattery? Rent a few billboards? Listen up, everybody. You're all OK! Maybe we could send out warm and caring social workers to convince the punks and pimps to like

themselves better so that they could find fulfillment as junior assistant night managers at McDonald's. We might be able to provide big-time drug dealers with such potent perceptions of self-worth that they would give tip their Maseratis and Swiss bank accounts. We could get the governor to issue a proclamation: Everybody in California is hereby proclaimed indubitably (and perpetually) estimable!

Aha. Estimable. There is another word that can't be found anywhere in my bill, and that I never heard at all from the self-esteem mongers who sold me this silly notion. Before we get all fired up to esteem ourselves, shouldn't we have some clear idea of what is estimable and what is not? Is there a "way of knowing" that could provide such an idea?

Could that be the real problem in this whole mess? Could it be that lots of people are all screwed up and disorderly because they live without any idea at all as to what is estimable and what is not, and even without any idea at all that there could *be* such an idea? Hell, those poor losers that my bill is aimed at have probably never even heard the *word*. But you can be damn sure they've heard "esteem" a million times, and right in the very schools where the list of words suitable for use in textbooks does not include "estimable," so that no budding self-esteemeer will suffer a decrease of self-esteem through stumbling on the fact that he doesn't understand the meaning of "estimable."

Damn! I've been suckered, royally suckered. By guidance counsellors! Maybe it's not too late. Maybe I can withdraw that stupid bill before any one *else* thinks about it. Maybe...

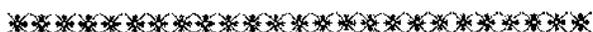
Enough. It's nothing but a melancholy fantasy. Vasconcellos thought no such thoughts. He is surely a busy man, busy making the world a better place. A busy man in such a worthy calling must get things done whether he understands them or not. Are the needs of the people to wait upon the requirements of Reason?

And somewhere there is a wood cutter who has so many trees to cut down that he can't be bothered with sharpening his ax. Eventually, his trees do fall, but his friends try to be out of range when that happens. If you live in California, this might be a good time to start looking around for way out of the woods.

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GRAMMARIAN

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**The Underground
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The Machine Stops
Pulling the Plug in Peoria

THERE is no scarcity in this world of people who discover, when left to their own resources, that they haven't. The man who lives by saying to himself what the world has told him has nothing to say when the world is still, and the servant of routine, dismissed from that service, in which any servant will serve as well as another, has nothing to do.

So it is that we must provide for the old what we provide for the little children—government custodial centers, sanctimoniously supervised temples of trivial pursuit. On the eastern shore of life, we can all sit down and relate to self and others by enhancing self-esteem awareness while making, out of varnished buns and bits of uncooked pasta, collages of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. When we come to the western shore, having done our civic duty by serving the greater good of the greater number and competing with the Japanese, when the helpers fail and the comforts flee—the rules by which we once knew what to do and when, the callings and titles by which we thought to name ourselves—once again we will all sit down and relate to self and others by enhancing self-esteem awareness while

making, out of varnished buns and bits of uncooked pasta, collages of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. Despite its tidy symmetry, the prospect does not please. It is, in fact, vile.

These morose meditations arose in response to some very disgusting news from Peoria, the shocking story of a truly innocent man, abandoned and betrayed by the master whom he had faithfully served for all his life.

It happened so: A blind high school girl in Peoria has been told that she can not be graduated without taking a course in "driver education." That's the rule. Her only alternative would be a course in "safety," which isn't offered at her school.

This is not exactly a case to try the wisdom of Solon, and a less faithful public servant than school principal David Barwell would just let the girl graduate. If some higher-up should over-rule—fine. Let *him* make an ass of himself. In the first eleven years of her schooling, many of her teachers, and perhaps even a few of her guidance counsellors, probably noticed that the girl was blind. It seems a bit late to be imposing preposterous conditions, unless, of course, the girl went blind deliberately in order to circumvent... No. That would probably be hard to prove. The hell with it. Let'er go.

But Barwell—which is just what he would have been named had Congreve made this comedy—Barwell is the compleat servant. Assiduously has he listened to his master's voice. He knows the words and sings the tune. That's how you get to *be* a principal. He knows the guidelines and finds no fault in them. His decision, as it must be, is not truly his. He just transmits it. The girl must take the course.

It's hardly an unusual case. Equivalent absurdities sprout daily in every bureaucracy in the world, and if Barwell had stuck to the guidelines and kept his mouth shut, we would never have heard of him. He would have been left in the hazy peace of the obedient routiner, that perfect "adjustment to life" which schoolers seek, the peace which precludeth all understanding.

But the goddess of understanding is a contrary lass. Often, she leaves her ardentest worshippers to mutter idiotic guidelines of their own in an empty temple. Out in the streets, she tosses her saucy locks at some total stranger and whispers in his wondering ear—Hey listen, Jack, don't be a

jerk. Then off she flits, leaving the poor chap to make do with exactly what he doesn't have. His own devices.

Something like that must have happened to David Barwell. Something must have bugged him, some sour discontent. Well, yes, the matter "could be perceived as being" preposterous, he may have said, in the cant of his calling, but it can't truly *be* preposterous. It's in the guidelines! It is the collective wisdom of trained professionals, and far more likely to be right than the mere thinking of a mere person.

And so, at one of life's crossroads, where some might have found freedom in realizing that *the thinking of a person* can be rational, and collective compromise can not, Barwell saw that there was only one thing a good principal could do. In this collision between common sense and guidelines, he must take a stand *of his own!* He must boldly stand forth, live, and in person, stoutly to defend and confirm, *in his very own words*, the preposterous. And here are his very own words:

She will be a passenger and a pedestrian, and who knows, there might be some dire emergency in her future life where she might have to drive.

We would like to comment, but we can't. We just can't.

Socrates said that philosophy was preparation for death, by which he did not mean "Death Education." Nor did he mean what we now mean by "philosophy." For us, it is either a "subject" offered, but rarely accepted, in school, or a supremely difficult intellectual exercise of no particular use. For Socrates it was just a thoughtful way of life, a way open to any conscious human being. It could also be called, accurately and simply, Education, but not in any currently popular sense of that word. Its aims were modest: self-knowledge and self-government by principles readily to be discovered in rational thoughtfulness.

Socrates also thought, as we do not, that the seed of the good life did not have to be planted, but only nurtured; it was *in* us, every one, by nature. He would not, as we do, turn in despair from the "thinking" of David Barwell.

Ah, my dear David, he would say, dire indeed would that emergency be, and I must suspect that

the unfortunate young lady's driving would make it direr still. Nevertheless, you have truly described our predicament and wisely commended that prudence by which we would be best served. We are indeed pedestrians and passengers, walking where habit and custom have laid the paths, and driven, we know not where, in stern Necessity's growling machine. How well it behooves us all to learn to drive for ourselves, and, to that end, to cure in ourselves whatever blindness that might indeed be cured. How else shall we conduct ourselves in the land where the paths do not run, and wisely turn the wheel, should Necessity, who is as comforting as stern, rest from steering? Dire indeed will that emergency be, nor will we save the day by driving blind. So let us now take thought. . .

But Socrates is dead, and all the Barwells must be left to their own devices.

Run, Babbit, Run! Businessism in Academe

CYBERNETIC SYSTEMS 196A is for students who will find themselves face-to-face with the complexity of today's business, management, and social human activity systems - the real world. APPLIED SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE will give you the added edge. In order to see from both a global and the specific part perspective with the leverage to create, implement, and regulate change in real world problems.

WHAT you see above is absolutely *sic*. The sage who stands ready to guide young minds into a "global and specific part perspective" is called Scott Taylor, and also called a member of the "faculty" at San Jose State University. In addition to that grand perspective, he also promises "marketable systems tools and methodologies to help bring order out of chaos." In the real world, of course, in the social human activity systems other than spelling and syntax.

Academe, in these times, looks like a once placid and independent principality, now subjugated and colonized not by one greater power but by many lesser. It is as though Cæsar had sat quietly at home, preferring peace, and ceding the cities' precincts, one by one, to each of the Gallic tribes, and saying, when nothing

remained but his garden, Rome still stands! And here in Academe, which also still stands, there is no acknowledged principle by which we can conclude that the study of history is more likely to be conducive to education than the learning of hairdressing.

Thus it is that we suffer, and truly deserve, Scott Taylor and others of his tribe beyond counting. Since anything that human beings can come to do is now designated the fruit of some sort of “education,” Academe can harbor, as it does, everything from Professors of Getting and Spending to Professors of Fun and Games. And every single one of them, whatever his tribe, pronounces himself a legitimate mentor of other minds by virtue of a claim so astonishing, so impudent, so preposterous, so childish, and so baffling, that the thoughtless never dream of doubting it, and the thoughtful, seeing the edge of the appalling abyss of ignorance, fall silent, and tiptoe care fully away, knowing not where, and wondering why, to begin.

And where would *you* begin? What would *you* say to a man who either can’t or won’t think himself out of an absurdity like that “global and specific part perspective,” but who also claims mastery of The Real World?

That is the claim they all make, and against which we know not what to say. Down the hall from Plato, and just around the corner from Toynbee and Dante, you’ll find a young man, a very young man, who knows the *real* world of systems tools and leverage. When vexed beyond all bearing by the extravagant fantasies of Goethe and Shakespeare, in whom there is no bottom line, nor any profit either, students at San Jose State may readily refresh themselves (and marketably, too) by seeking wisdom from one who knows how to create, implement, and regulate change in the *real* world of social human activity systems. Ah, if only Creon had taken that course.

By “the real world,” the businessists of Academe mean something or other about money, its use and acquisition, and the knacks and contrivances out of which money may be made. Who would deny that their “world” is real? The hula hoop was real, whatever that might mean, just as real as the Southsea Bubble. But even the tense in which we are naturally inclined to compose such a statement suggests some

qualification of the “reality” that we ascribe to certain kinds of things.

We detect an obvious but not easily explicable wrongness in saying that the hula hoop *is* real, and a wrongness not related to the triviality of the hula hoop, for it does not vanish when we say that the Southsea Bubble *is* real. That wrongness does vanish, if we can say, being lucky enough still to have one, that *this* hula hoop is real. Exactly the same variations can be played, just now, with Nehru jackets and pet rocks, and, in the future, near or far, with the silicon chip and the MBA, if you just happen to have any of those still lying about. Such things, as our language notices for us even when we don’t, do not truly commend themselves to us as The Real, but only as what we happen to be noticing just here and now.

But all such things are also manifestations of something that is obviously not limited to here and now, It is not a “professor” of merchandizing who will marvelously enlighten some murky corner of our minds through consideration of the extraordinary success of the hula hoop; Aristophanes is the fellow for that job. Or Shaw. Or Moliere. Or Plautus. Or Dickens. Or Gogol. Or . . . At this point, *you* can append your own list.

And what list, we wonder, would Scott Taylor append?

Business is not new. Only its techniques and details are new, continually new, which is to say that they are always in the act of disappearing. Our eyes, trapped in the here and now, can not behold the certain withdrawal of the silicon chip and the MBA into that “real” world where the hula hoop now resides. If the ‘study’ of business is in fact the accumulation of details and the acquisition of techniques, it is not an education but an apprenticeship, which would far better be conducted by those who *do* business. Such an enterprise, furthermore, can make no just claim on the public. There is no more justice in forcing taxpayers to provide accountants for those businesses that need accountants than in forcing them to provide rubber cement for those that need rubber cement.

And *that* is exactly the kind of proposition that would be always under scrutiny if the “study” of business were truly pertinent to education. The least and indivisible appearance of business, the molecule of the matter, is a transaction between one person and another. That engagement of

persons is universal and essential; convertible debentures and diversification are particular and accidental. A transaction between one person and another is also the molecule of politics. Of society. Of war, and peace. Of all institutions that exist because persons exist.

What shall we say of a man who claims understanding of some human institution, but who holds, as businessists routinely do, that there is no practical use but only “acculturation” in the study of history, literature, and philosophy, the disciplined considerations of all that is universal and essential in the institution he claims to understand? And, out of what bizarre idea of “the real” would we imagine that the hula hoop—or the convertible debenture—or even money—is “real” in some way that can not be equaled by thoughtful account and consideration of persons and deeds, the molecule of the only *meaning* we can see?

So, while there are many reasons to kick these carpetbagging businessists out of school, we’ll say only that they don’t understand business, and they’re not in touch with The Real World.

The Goodness of Good English

The Society for the Advancement of Good English is scolding... Richardson Vicks, Inc. ... runner-up in SAGE’s 1984 Dunce Cap of the Year race for its ... slogan: “Nobody knows wood as good.” The top dishonoree: The Nashville Songwriters Association ... for its “persistent display of low standards of literacy in song titles and lyrics.”

SAGE’s Award of Merit for 1984 went to Richard Mitchell, publisher of *The Underground Grammarian*.

USA Today, Dec. 28, 1984

WHAT a problem. We are pleased and honored not only to be cited for special merit but even to be *known* to the Society for the Advancement of Good English. Our subscribers put us in mind of McNamara’s Band—the finest in the land, without a doubt, but just as surely, very few in number.

But we are a bit troubled that we are put on the top rung of a ladder whose bottom rung is occupied by the Nashville Songwriters

Association. It is not that we shrink from any association, even to our credit, with such folk; it is rather that we find no logic *in* that association. It is as though the apple were to be praised for being a wholesome and nourishing food, and the screwdriver condemned as a particularly noxious one.

Hearing that charge, even the most fervid partisan of food might be led to consider certain rarely noticed demerits of the apple—its handle, for example, is poorly fastened—and we are led to wonder what “goodness” it is in us that might be deemed the very opposite of some “badness” in the work of the Nashville songwriters.

We must reason without evidence. The only Nashvillish song we’ve ever heard of—and it may not exist—is “I Got Tears in My Ears from Lyin’ on My Pillow and Cryin’ over You.” But we know the style, the persistent display cited by SAGE, for it is neither new nor peculiar to Nashville. It will not be impertinent, therefore, to ask this: Would some badness have been driven out and replaced by goodness if only Gershwin had written, “Bess, You Are My Woman Now,” and “It Isn’t Necessarily So”?

We do believe that “country and western” lyrics are full of gaucheries, vulgarisms, double negatives, failures of agreement, split infinitives, and all other possible outrages against standard English. But why is that so? Is there in such texts some intention to deceive, some pretense to substance where there is none? Do those Nashville songwriters demand respect and influence as persons of special knowledge and understanding, only to reveal, in their compositions, that they are ignorant and irrational? Have they claimed superior moral and social sensibilities, by which virtues they have become fit mentors of others, only to display, in their words, sentiments and beliefs quite contrary to those they profess? Would we be able to discover and demonstrate in the Nashville lyricists what we *do* discover and demonstrate so regularly in “professionals” who do *not* confine themselves to double negatives: mendacity, charlatanism, pomposity, evasiveness, manipulateness, and, not rarely, an irrationality so pronounced that it is hardly to be told from madness?

If the Nashville songwriters make their ways in the world by providing pleasure to any who will

buy it, and without consideration of any principle by which to discover whether or not they *should* provide that pleasure to any who will buy it, they are merely whores, and not to be distinguished in principle, but only in detail, from any others of that numerous company. But their whoring is not in their English. Should there arise among us a large group of people who would liberally enrich those songwriters whose lyrics were fashioned of the most impeccably grammatical English, we can be sure that many fine stylists would also appear among us, and that Fowler and the Harbrace Handbook would be selling well, even in Nashville. And, in the time of that unlikely fad, there would be no more justice or logic in honoring the High Style Songwriters for the “goodness” of their English than there is now in condemning the Nashville songwriters for the “badness” of theirs. In either party, those who crank it out are whores, and the level of their English doesn’t matter. In either party, those who seek to disclose, within the severe constraints of their craft, some small glimmering of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, so that those who come seeking only pleasure are surprised by joy and made better, those precious few are artists. And the level of their English doesn’t matter. As to which are which, judgment can be made not by association, but only case by case, and slowly.

In studying the texts that provide our substance, we give very little attention to what is wrong, and much to what is false. We are neither injured nor insulted by him who says that he ain’t got no dog. It is not likely, even if he happens to *be* lying, that his “wrongness” is the clue by which we can *discover* his lying.

We would feel much better about all this if only that award had come from a Society for the Advancement of *Correct* English. We do prefer that sort, for it *almost* always provides the best hope of uttering clear truth, but also, as grammar enthusiasts would do well to remember, the best hope of contriving a cunning lie.

There is no goodness or badness in English. Goodness and badness are in the deeds of persons. The proper study of mankind is *man*, and English is an interesting thing he does—well or ill.

*Neither can his mind be thought to be in tune,
whose words do jarre; nor his reason in frame,
whose sentence is preposterous.*

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