

The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Twelve, Number One February 1988

The Lessons We Learn

TO QUESTION ALL THINGS: never to turn away from any difficulty; to accept no doctrine either from ourselves or from other people without a rigid scrutiny by negative criticism; letting no fallacy, or incoherence, or confusion of thought, step by unperceived; above all, to insist on having the meaning of a word clearly understood before using it, and the meaning of a proposition before assenting to it;—these are the lessons we learn from the ancient dialecticians. *J. S. Mill*

WE can imagine no better words with which to begin the twelfth volume of THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN. Had we known of them twelve years ago, we would have wasted less time on trivia, and might by now be farther along the path that we only gradually have learned to walk. Little by little we have come to see that the only important reason for the scrutiny of language is that it, and it alone, can discover thought and consider it thoughtfully. We see, too, that without such discovery and consideration, no one can ever answer the question to which we want to give all of our attention, to wit, what understanding should we have of that condition which might be called “education.”

That “should” is essential. It is foolish to ask, What is education? Education has no existence of its own. It is an idea made by human beings, who must live, whether they know it or not, the life demanded and relentlessly enforced by their ideas.

What Mill says is surely “true,” in the sense which means that it is so; it is a fact, a bit of information. We would quibble only with that pronoun, that “we” in his conclusion: “These are the lessons we learn...” We don’t. Some of us might, presumably, learn those lessons, and Mill very probably did, but it makes no sense at all to

ascribe that learning to mankind, or to society, or to any collective nonentity which has not any of the equipment needed for learning—neither mind nor will, nor any conscious center of its being at all. His pronoun, of course, does not intend to assert any such thing, but is nothing more than “a manner of speaking,” and perhaps, as well, a *politesse*, for it would have ill become him to say, however truthfully, that those are the lessons that some very few of us have learned from the ancient dialecticians.

Nevertheless, manners of speaking have a way of insinuating themselves into the mind and becoming manners of thinking. It is not hard to find people who do believe that “we” are more intelligent and logical than our ancestors, that we have started life at a higher point on some scale that measures the development of uniquely human powers, which include both the making of transistors and the making of sense. The slightly more subtle of such folk imagine that we do, nevertheless, owe some debt of gratitude to our forbears, for they were “we” in their time, and thus were able better to endow us than they themselves had been endowed.

If you want to test this notion of intellectual evolution, read again, very slowly, the passage from Mill, and then look around you. Pay close attention. Read. Listen. And, if you are very brave, pay close attention to yourself.

Mill’s enumeration provides help in the defining of “education,” in deciding not what education is but what it should be. If it made sense to say that education is something, it would need no definition; description would suffice. What we call education can indeed be described, however, and Mill’s list is a useful test, not for the facts of our education, which are, however numerous, publicly verifiable, but for its meaning, which is less clear.

Does our education include among its meanings the conviction that it is necessary to question all things? Is there some school in this land where that is included in a “mission statement”? Is there an educationist, or a politician, who will put that in writing? What will become of our famous “respect for the beliefs of others” if we learn continually—and “negatively”—to question our own most precious beliefs?

Is there somewhere a school of education, or a school of any sort, where students and teachers

agree that they will use no word whose meaning is not completely and perfectly clarified? Is there some lecturer in some class who will utter no untested proposition as though it were truth, who will put forth no sentiment or belief, however laudable or popular, as though it were the informed conclusion of an expert? Is there some guidance counselor, or some curriculum facilitator, or some outcomes assessment specialist, who will let no fallacy, or incoherence, or confusion of thought step by unnoticed?

We have spent all these years in considering the language of such people, and of their numerous cousins. We do know, because we have done lots of asking around among the kin-folks, and because we studied the catalogs and the self-praising handouts of many an education academy, that the educationists have no love for the ancient dialecticians. But their practice and their prose are such as to make us suspect that it is not ignorance of the ancient dialecticians that informs their minds at all. They are so universally and consistently irrational that we are led to suspect that they do know the lessons that Plato taught us, and that they hate them, and hope to destroy them. It may be that they are not unenlightened, but that they prefer the darkness.

It is hard to imagine, for instance, a more useful work than the *Theatatus* for those who are going to presume to teach others, and who would do well to discover and develop some orderly and rational understandings of the strange human powers that we call learning and knowing, but incipient teachers do not study it. Why not? Is it *only* because incipient school-teachers are often little inclined to intellectual deliberation of any sort, and probably just as ready as their instructors to turn away from any difficulty at all? We think there is more than that. We think that even so little a thing as that one work of Plato would, in even a dull mind, have the effect of making ridiculous and overturning all of the pet notions and articles of faith that have made our schooling what it is, a phantasmagoria of sentiment and belief in the comfort of the boundless Affective Domain, and that the schoolers, or some of them, at least, know this. They need unreason, and love it. They need the support and approval of a populace that can not examine their words in the light of the lessons we might learn from the ancient dialecticians, and a happy fate has put them in a position to assure

that most Americans will *not* stop to consider what a word or a proposition might mean, and will never notice such things as fallacy, or incoherence, or confusion of thought, and will always, always retreat from any difficulty of understanding into slogans and catchwords and the thirty-second “debates” of politicians.

The lessons of the ancient dialecticians are surely stern commandments, the intellectual equivalent of “Be ye perfect.” Who can heed them, perfectly and always? But what can we say of an “education” in which they have no part, in which they are not even proposed, or, as is usually the case, not even heard of, either by the students or their teachers, and where their revival would cause intolerable disruption?

In fact, of course, there is one thing we can say of such a perverted sort of education: It is the very sort we have.

Taking Five Baby Steps

The items found in this test were selected by taking every 50th item from the list (which yield [*sic*] 95 items) and the selecting at random five additional items found to be 25 items removed from an item previously used.

Please select from the five presented the one item that has the closest relationship with the test item. In many instances it will pay the examinee to estimate, or “play a hunch.” Remember cultural literate information is rarely detailed or precise.

HIDDEN in the word *intelligence* is the idea of gathering, of selecting and arranging, of looking, it might be said, not just for things, but for some principle by which to choose these things rather than some others. It seems one of the intentions of the educationists to keep that idea hidden, lest anyone notice that their idea of intelligence isn’t even close to the real thing.

The thing you see above, for instance, is an educationistic exercise in fake intelligence. The passage comes from the instructions provided with an “instrument,” which was handed out to a bunch of schoolteachers in St. Louis. It was called a Cultural Literacy Instrument by him who handed it out, one William H. Ahlbrand, who is acting as the dean of the School of Education at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, IL.

Appended to the instructions for the taking of the instrument—Take two instruments and call me in the morning—is something called “*Test of Cultural Literacy*.” (Italics ours) Like cultural literate information, cultural literate nomenclature is “rarely detailed or precise.” The test is full of great stuff. This sort of thing:

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

- A. Government official
- B. Sargent [*sic*] at arms
- C. Intercom system
- D. Propaganda agent
- E. Prodigy

For that one, any “answer” except C is unforgivably insipid, although it does have the demerit of being detailed and precise. And here’s an especially intriguing one:

ALEINATION (also *sic*)

- A. Estrangement
- B. A foreign visitor
- C. A term of affection
- D. A measurement of land
- E. A military

“Tests” of this sort tell us much more about the maker than about the taker. No one with any sense of language at all could possibly be persuaded, even if he had never heard of “aleination,” into choosing either B, C, or D. In our language, terms for such things are little likely to end with “-ation,” and it is obvious that the testmaker never thought of that, or even of the possibility that some taker might actually *think* about the question before playing a hunch. Nor did he give, apparently, the smallest damn for the fact, which might be well worth thinking about, that estrangement, the desired answer, is *not* a kind of alienation, not even in the same genus. But, of course, neurotic scrupulosity about such distinctions is not included in the idea of *cultural* literacy, however interesting they may find it, who seek nothing but mere literacy.

Well, we weren’t going to blame Hirsch for the stupidity of the questions. He didn’t concoct *them*. But we got thinking about it, and decided, what the hell, let’s do blame Hirsch. It was he who gave this stupid game to the educationists, and he deserves whatever discredit they might earn him.

Here’s a true story. A teacher was talking to his class. He happened, for reasons that seemed good at the time, to refer to an “influential culture,” to wit, that of ancient Greece in the Golden Age of Athens. The students were young, mostly in their twenties, so he thought it best to explain that, by an influential culture he meant one whose ideas seem not only to have lasted but to have brought about certain qualities in our culture. He remarked, God knows why, that in the time of Athens there was, and not very far away, yet another influential culture, which also, like that of the Greeks, passed on to us its ideas, especially its ideas about right and wrong, justice and injustice, the worthy and the worthless. He was thinking, pretty obviously, of the culture of the ancient Jews, whose status as an influential culture is both obvious and indisputable, and within whose traditions some of his students actually lived. He wondered aloud, what a blunder, whether some student might be able to name it.

Silence. Averted eyes. The poor fellow pushed on. Surely, somebody... Then the students began to do exactly what they had been, for all their lives, trained to do, whenever there was a “question” to be “answered.” They began to guess.

They guessed Islam, which is currently much heard of, and therefore securely set into everyone’s cultural literacy. After all, a millenium and a half or so is just too detailed and precise for the culturally literate to fuss about. They guessed Rome, because they had heard of it and suspected that it was old. They guessed Egypt, but had to retreat when no one could come up with a single idea that our culture had inherited from Egypt except for reincarnation, which is not really one of the notions on which constitutional democracy—the day’s actual topic—was founded. The same inadequacy ruled out the Chinese and the Aztecs.

Suddenly the poor bozo realized what was happening. Aha, he said, Get out your pencils. We’re going to have a pop quiz. He went to the blackboard and wrote:

Besides the Greeks, another bunch of ancient people who came up with ideas that we still play with were the...

- A) Babylonians
- B) Hittites
- C) Jews

- D) Phoenicians
- E) Vikings

Everybody got it right. Everybody. And everybody would have gotten it right the first time, if only he had thought to ask the question that way the first time.

Thus they have been taught. Unless they are given some choices, they know not where to turn. Any thoughtful mind, when faced with a question like that one, goes through a process, looks for a path. Hmm. Let's see. There were Romans in those days, and Egyptians too, to say nothing of countless peoples I've never heard of. But, since I've never heard of them, they probably aren't the heavy influential cultures this guy has in mind. So what were the Romans up to in the fifth century BC? Wasn't Rome a big deal in Christian Times? Sure. Nero and the lions, and there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus. They just seem too late. And the Egyptians were certainly weird and interesting, I guess, but I'm damned if I can think of anything particularly Egyptian in the way the world wags now. OK, so who else was around? The Christians themselves would be good candidates, if it weren't for the fact that BC means BC. Too bad. But wait, that whole Christian business is sort of tied up with... Aha! And there it is. No big deal.

That line of thinking doesn't really take a whole lot of information. Most of what is needed could come just as easily from television or movies as from books. And, in fact, it *needn't* be especially detailed or precise. It is all cheap information, easy to come by and calling for no understanding at all. But from it, as from any information, understanding can be discovered and sense can be made.

But in that class that day, no one set about the work of trying to make sense. Everyone was trying to remember, if it was there to be remembered at all, some little item of information, some random and unassociated little fact floating all disconnected in the vast empty spaces where all possible facts can be, if you are lucky, found and trotted out. And the task was all the harder, impossible in fact, because no concrete possibilities, no A to D, had been put forth for hunch-playing.

Sense does have to be *made*. It does not float around like information, and when we hear some

sense that someone else has made, we have ourselves done nothing more than gather another piece of information. "Now *that* is what so and so thinks" is the best that can be said of the sense that someone else has made. We can not even truthfully say "I agree" unless and until we have walked the same path, found the same connections, and made the same sense. Lacking that, "I agree" means nothing more than "I accept." In our schools, "I remember" is the "correct" answer to questions like those found on the Cultural Literacy Instrument. "I accept" is the correct answer to essay questions.

Remembering is the toddling of the mind. It is the barest beginning of walking, as walking is the barest beginning of finding the right way to go to the right place for the right reason. Very little remembering is needed for serious thought, but it is done at the far end of the very same road where the toddler takes his first steps. And accepting is the paralysis of the mind, the point at which the toddler supposes that the road comes to an end.

That's what our unfortunate friend saw in his classroom: paralyzed toddlers. No one had given them permission to take their five baby steps, from A) to E), none of the above. They knew not how to go, or where to stop.

Ordinarily, it is easy. There! I've got it. Ralph Waldo Emerson? B) Author. Peasant? B) again. Agricultural worker. Little Jack Horner? Hmnn. C) Sat on a tuffet? No. Doesn't sound right Aha! There's A) Sat in a corner. Rhymes. Must be it. (Those are all, by the way, to be found on the Cultural Literacy Instrument.) And so on, all the way. A tiny, short path, and an end. An acceptance. No need to toddle further.

Think of it this way. Suppose that you have taught your children—well, "taught" seems singularly inappropriate in this context. Let's start again.

Suppose that you have, somehow or other, with flashcards perhaps, brought your children to "know" that Emerson was an author, that a peasant is an agricultural worker, and that Little Jack Horner sat in a corner. Will they therefore rise up some day and bless your name? Or is that not enough? Suppose that you do likewise as to alienation and the speaker of the house? Suppose you go even further and bring them to be acquainted with hundreds more such bits of information? Thousands. Tens of thousands! And

what then? So what? Will you expect praise for doing what could just as well have been done by the flashcards themselves? And, in all that showing and telling, a task that is by nature infinite, what will you have found no time to do?

This is a problem of language. We do not know, some of us seem to *choose* not to know, what we mean by “teach.” Is the telephone directory a teacher? Is any useful distinction made at all in saying that we can “teach” each other those things that anyone can look up for himself? Is he a “teacher,” who informs you that a peasant is an agricultural worker, and not a bird? Is he a friend or something else, who asks you questions to which he already knows the answers? Is that “testing,” or is that combat? Is it an education, or is it a training, in which success depends upon remembering and accepting?

The subtitle of Hirsch’s book is seldom mentioned. “What Every *American* Should Know.” (Our italics). What a puzzling qualification. Its worth lies probably in its power to fatten up the book. A book of What Every Person Should Know would be thinner, listing less and meaning more.

Brief Notes

WE hear surprisingly often from readers who have started, or are thinking of starting, their own cottage publications. They usually say that it is this sheet that has thus inspired them. We are not ashamed to hear that. The more publishing the better. What could be more conducive to “informed consent” than two newspapers in mortal combat in every American town? Three, of course.

Exactly how many competing newsletters are directed in this land to glassblowers, we are unsure, but they had all better look to their laurels, for there is now one more. We have just received Volume I, Number One of *Lamp Shop Employment Report*, the latest of our godchildren. We wish it calm seas and a prosperous voyage. If you are a glassblower, or would like to be one, you should write to the editor, Michael Olsen, at 341 South Clarkson, Denver, Colorado, 80209.

THREE Great Booklets are now in print. We intend more. Pay attention to your reading. Keep

watching for especially illuminating, or provoking, or even distressing passages. Send them in. It is best, of course, that the passages be old and not in copyright, but, frankly, most of your reading should be from old books anyway, and, indeed, from books that you have already read once or more. The habitual reading of new books is a vice in the murky middle ground between sushi-sampling and adultery, often a sign either of insufficient employment or of idle curiosity, and not to be encouraged except in the very young—under 40.

We hope to have a Fourth Great Booklet ready by May, and we are even thinking of a Great Booklet devoted entirely to excerpts from one author. Boethius and Erasmus come immediately to mind, of course, but if you have any candidates of your own, we’d like to hear about them.

THE associate circulation manager has been instructed to add 278 new readers to the subscription list. We think he is getting some help from a certain physician in Atlanta, who seems to be handing out Leaflets for the Masses along with prescriptions. Why not? *Mens sana*, right? We have thought of advertising, but we just don’t seem able to describe this sheet in a way that is both brief and accurate. If you can do that, we’d love to hear from you. Or, if you have a friend who would like to read this stuff, let us know, and we’ll send off a few sample copies, and even a leaflet.

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Glassboro, New Jersey 08028
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Eight issues a year. One year subscription:
Persons in the USA or Canada, \$15US;
Persons elsewhere, \$20; non-personal
entities of any sort at all, \$25, or maybe
even more.

*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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Volume Twelve, Number Two March 1988

Doing the Asking

A READER writes to say that he gets into trouble when he sits around with friends talking about ethics. They have the habit of claiming, or, as they seem to suppose, of *pointing out*, that all ethical values are, of course, relative, and that puts an end to the discussion. As a regular reader of the Great Booklets, our correspondent asks us to suggest some further readings, in texts ancient or modern, that consider the vexing possibility that notions about the good and the bad are only relative.

But he does not need to read the thinking of others. He has made the mistake of imagining that, somehow or other, he ought to *answer* that popular belief with a pre-emptive strike of his own, and he would like some ammunition from authority. But an answer to such an assertion is just a contrary assertion, a feeble mental twitch out of which no understanding can come. It is just so that our politicians “debate,” lambasting each other mightily with straws, and proving, conclusively and once and for all, that one believes A, the other, B. Big deal.

What such assertions call for is not answering, but questioning, and that not to test them for truth, but only to find out what they mean, for until and unless we know what a proposition means, we can hardly test its truth. It will, furthermore, often turn out that he who makes such an assertion has no idea what he means, and that is a test of another sort, and entertaining, too.

Thus we advise our friend. When a man tells you ideas of good and bad are, of course, relative, ask him: What, exactly, do you mean? Do you mean that there is a land where a man would be ashamed and chagrined to have it known that he once told the truth, and that he would hotly defend himself against such a charge? Or do you mean that there is no truth in any case, and that what is thought a lie in one land is thought a truth in

another, as dogs are food in one place and pets in another?

Are you saying that the citizens of Mexico, or of some land of which we may never have heard, admire the corruption of public officials as a virtue, and urge their children to emulate it? Or are you saying that there are people who envy the success and the apparent immunity of corrupt officials, and would like to get in on the action? Have you heard of some people whose legends and fairy-tales bestow princesses and kingdoms upon cowards and cheaters, or do you rather mean to say that there are plenty of cowards and cheaters in secure possession of our princesses and kingdoms?

Or can it be something more subtle that you have in mind—perhaps the suspicion that our ideas of goodness, even if they *are* remarkably consistent in principle in so many times and places, can not possibly be rooted in our nature, but must come entirely from our nurture? It does, after all, seem unlikely that there is a gene for ethics. If that is so, however, do we not discover that it will lead us into questioning how it could possibly have come about that persons beyond counting without any natural ethical propensities at all have ended up forming societies beyond counting in which there *is* such a remarkable consistency in principle?

Or could you perhaps mean to say that the times change, and we change in them? That there is now more crime than there used to be, or less? That the idea of the moral worth of marriage, for instance, or of such things as a man’s “word of honor,” is no longer the impulse of behavior that it used to be? And that many deeds that our elders despised, we do not despise, and that much of what they would not tolerate, we have learned to tolerate?

Or are you thinking of the fact that there actually are people, and sometimes in large groups, who do admire such things as cunning and successful aggression, and who feel no contempt for either the inside trader or the arrogant bully, but only envy? In such, do we see a truly relative idea of good and bad, or do we see perversity? Can it be that Epictetus was right in saying that anyone at all, unless depraved, could look about him and discover the good by asking himself, when his own self-interest was not involved, what sorts of deeds he admired in others? Can it be that there is such a thing as depravity, and that there

are people who hate the brave and the honest, calling them either fakes or suckers?

Or are you perhaps asserting a fact that might better be called psychological than moral? Are you reasoning from the popular psychology of our time, by whose conclusions we are urged to see self-expression where some might see self-indulgence, and to admire as a virtue the ambition that the naive are prone to call greed? Do you have in mind the dire warnings of the psychologists, that those who bottle up such natural reactions as wrath and resentment and envy, and the urge to kill, will suffer harm that they might easily avoid by letting it all hang out?

Well, that is surely a mighty herd of questions, and we will probably not live long enough to answer them all, but since we can not even know what we are talking about unless we do answer some of them, let us choose one and make a beginning. Any answer to any one of them will lead us to the next questions, and, who knows, somewhere down the road we may find, not answers, to be sure, but some small and surprising revelations, and turns of the path that we hadn't expected. It's going to be a long night, but how better could we spend it than in looking for what we all need more than anything else—nothing less than a way of understanding how to live?

We can promise our frustrated friend that, if he adopts such a line of reasoning, he will a), learn something, and b), teach nothing, and c), find himself not invited to the next meeting of that bull-session. Everybody loves an answer, but nobody likes a smartass.

And we would advise him further, not to go to such bull-sessions, and to excuse himself whenever they erupt, explaining that he has to go and watch a rerun of "Laverne and Shirley." The much-praised Socratic method, in which even schoolteachers now think themselves expert, just doesn't work in ordinary life. It needs a long, long time, and unaccountably patient participants; and it also needs an author, a very good one. We should take the Dialogues of Plato not as models of what we ought to do when confronted by those who believe that they know, but as models of what we should do in our heads when we catch ourselves believing that we know.

But we can still tell our reader what to read. Anything. If only he reads closely enough to distinguish the writers who do the telling from

those who do the asking, anything will serve him well.

Wacky Enough for Paleologos

WE often find ourselves speaking of educationists and politicians in the same breath. Someday we must try to explain that at length, but some of the likenesses are both obvious and instructive.

Both packs are feeding at the public trough, and therefore have it in common that they want the public to feel good about them. That's why they do their important work, as distinguished from their mere work, in that good old Affective Domain. And both, while endlessly thrashing around trying to look good, pretend that they know how to do what they are paid to do. So it is that we know exactly what to expect when the educationists promise that more children will learn to esteem themselves and to read, and when the politicians promise that they will do something about the cost of car insurance and simplify the tax code.

Nevertheless, if the Founders had had the foresight to separate not only church and state, which is much to be desired, but also school and state, an even more dangerous connection, we would never have heard of a certain Nicholas A. Paleologos. His name puts one in mind of some venerable sage, full of years and understanding, but he is instead the chairman of the House Education Committee in the state of Massachusetts. He is tickled pink to have gotten through the legislature an appropriation of fifteen million dollars with which to "stimulate innovation and creativity" in the schools. Again.

The measure once passed, Paleologos "explained" his triumph, if that's the right word, to the *Boston Globe*: "If we were beating the drum, we might have ended up like all the other sexy items—dead." While he would have done better to say, "if we *had been* beating the drum," he has indeed found a truth. How better to understand the whole of American schooling than as the crypt of creativity, the barrow of bold innovative thrusts, a vast collection of buildings whose offices, halls, classrooms, cafeterias, gymnasiums, libraries, broom closets, and even the bulletin boards, are littered with the putrefying

remains of thousands and thousands of dead sexy items?

Who would have dreamed that death had slain so many? *Nil*, however, *desperandum*. The fifteen million dollars of Paleologos will fetch fresh fodder. It will be doled out to this school and that in order to encourage the school people to sit around and talk about what they are doing, which they can hardly be expected to do without some fat extra funding, of course. They will thus be “challenged to propose new approaches to education,” and then, if their notions have the right stuff, paid more money to “try their proposals out for two or three years.” Wow. What a breakthrough.

And what, exactly, is the right stuff? Hear the words of Paleologos: “My problem is that they won’t be wacky enough. I want them to be as bold as possible.”

Yes. Wacky are the bold.

Well, we can reassure the poor fellow. Their proposals will indubitably be wacky enough. We know, for we have seen them all.

Passing strange. How would we explain to a Martian visitor that we had constituted for ourselves these two great classes of government workers, the first empowered to take from us as much wealth as possible and to bestow large portions of it, again and again, for the same, and so far utterly unaccomplished purpose of nothing less than the education of our children, upon the second, in the hope that *this time* it will buy us something wacky enough? How would we persuade our Martian guest that such an alliance is not a sinister conspiracy against the life of the mind, but only, as we want to think it, an accidental, and mutually beneficial, combination of one pack of amateurs with another? There are, after all, no politicians who *know* how to govern others wisely and justly, for there is no one at all who knows that. And, for the same reason, there are no educationists who *know* how to bring minds out of the darkness of suggestion and influence and into the light of individual thoughtfulness. Those people are just hacking around, trying this, that, and the other, over and over again, guessing and floundering, the governors ungoverned, and the educators uneducated. Some of them actually *would* like to accomplish the work they have promised. But, having never first set out and clarified the

principles of the arts for which they rake their pay, it is little wonder that in their desperation they can do nothing but scabble in the dirt hoping to unearth some new particulars. So they turn at first to the wacky, and then, for what else is there where there is no principle, to the wackier.

Our Martian might understand, but he would still ask how come we don’t just excuse those poor folk from their sad labors, and drive them into the sea.

Philosophy in California

Finally, about three quarters of the way through the meeting—soon after an emissary for absent member Jim Thompson mentioned some of the really bad things he has seen in the coaching of youth sports—somebody asked the obvious. “What do we mean by self-esteem?”

Nobody has a quick answer, so Fogel turned to a representative in the audience from the state task force.

She responded that, after a year of study, the state group “is working on a definition of self-esteem—it’s one of our toughest tasks. We’re still working on it.”

Incredibly, the task force did not seem discouraged by this news. On the contrary, they enthusiastically agreed to meet again on February 13 on a more informal basis, to get to know one another better, and again on February 25, perhaps to get cracking on that elusive definition.

A FEW years ago, we did a piece about a certain Vasconsellos in California, who was pushing for legislation to support the great cause of self-esteem by persuading all Californians, even with billboards, if that’s what it took, that they were estimable. It seems to have failed, since there are obviously some Californians who have not yet been convinced. On the other hand, it has succeeded enormously, for it has become a very popular cause indeed, providing employment not only for countless government functionaries, but also “outlets” for all sorts of public-spirited citizens who don’t have enough to do keeping themselves in order and can spare time for the great work of keeping others in order.

What you see above is a portion of a report by Larry Slonaker, a columnist who attended a meeting in San Jose of the county Self-Esteem Task Force. (There is, we're sure, a state ditto, and perhaps even a municipal. Maybe every family should have one.)

The task-forcers, all volunteers, were happily letting stuff out of their outlets, when one of them felt a sudden chill—the fell touch of the ghostly hand of John Stuart Mill, no doubt. He actually asked the question, that Mill suggests: Should we really go on talking about a word whose meaning we don't know?

That's mildly encouraging, for it does suggest that the mind, by nature, *wants* to put itself in order. But the sequel is not encouraging. It demonstrates that the mind's little glimmers can be readily and permanently extinguished. Who springs up to answer? An educrat, of course, one whose continued welfare is dependent upon perpetual confusion, out of which whole years can be spent in rapping about words that no one can understand.

Now, in fact, any ass can “define” self-esteem almost as easily as he can feel it. And almost any ass can see, when he has defined self-esteem, that he still doesn't *understand* it. There is a difference. And the school lady who “answered” the question probably—let's be kind—just used the wrong word. Surely, if *her* task force is doing work of any worth at all, it must be trying to understand what it *means* by self-esteem. In that interesting and useful endeavor, we can easily help her.

We would suggest that she and her pals first pay attention to the word, and try to discover that principle by which we can tell the difference between what is estimable and what is not. And should they conclude, as educationists well may, that nothing is either estimable or inestimable in itself, but only because someone deems it so, then they can abandon the whole project. If esteeming is an act not truly related to its object, then it is of no more worth than a liking for spinach. If they can decide, however, that something is worthy of esteem because of its own qualities, then they will have to face the fact that the bestowal of esteem upon certain Californians would be a very serious error.

And when they have finished with all of that, they can consider whether the bestowal of self-

esteem would be more rational and appropriate *before* the labor of self-knowledge or *after* it.

We'll send her our ideas, but she will not be glad to hear them. What the educationists want—what all the manipulators of people want—is not an understanding, but exactly the kind of “definition” that has to be put between quotation marks. It is the sort of “defining” that they do in such similar cases as those of “learning disability,” and “giftedness,” terms that they define in countless ways, depending, of course, on immediate convenience. If you need one sort of a grant, giftedness can be found in skateboard skills, but for another, giftedness can be seen in relating well to self and others.

We liked Slonaker's account of this bizarre meeting, except for one thing. “It's hard,” he said, to say anything bad about these “serious people” who “have the heart and energy to work for the community's benefit.” It's not hard.

Such people are *not* serious. If they were serious people they would *require* of themselves that they understand what they are talking about before putting themselves forth to dabble in the lives of others. And “heart” is cheap, and not to be trusted. It is just another sentiment, like self-esteem, which seems admirable only when left unexamined. The volunteers of San Jose are educationism's useful idiots, serving an ideology they don't understand. And for that, they are getting paid exactly what they all deserve—oodles of self-esteem.

And furthermore...

IN New Jersey, a politician has introduced a bill that would make it illegal for our fortune-tellers to “pretend to talk with the dead,” so phrased, presumably, to ensure the protection of the laws to those legitimate fortune-tellers who do talk with the dead. It would be the purpose of this legislation, he says, “to protect the gullible.”

That's a good job—the protection of the gullible. Steady work. The gullible in New Jersey are in only one very uncommon sense of the phrase an endangered species. They are far indeed from extinction, but they are, of course, in daily danger of being defrauded, conned, disappointed, persuaded, cajoled, flattered, converted, convinced, and in every possible way deceived.

Now, if you were nothing more than rational, you would think it a good idea for the politicians of New Jersey to make some provision also for the prevention of the gullible. But we do have to be practical, you know. If the gullible were to disappear, how would our politicians demonstrate that they are full of love and compassion, and have nothing in mind at all except the great Common Good? How would they make it clear that, without their sage counsel, we would all be sticking our hands into whirling lawn-mowers and drinking cleaning fluid, instead of investing, like wise and prudent citizens, in the state's lottery, and trotting dutifully to the polls to elect the protectors of the gullible of our choice? So we have arranged, in New Jersey, not for the prevention of the gullible, but for the production of the gullible.

It's not all that easy. Skepticism lies in wait for even the clod, and the silliest twit you know may some day, for a moment, suspect that he might be longing for something that he doesn't need, or notice that what he believes just happens to remarkably profitable to the people who told him to believe it. That sort of thing must be prevented, and for that sort of twit, it may be too late.

So we shoot the fish in the barrel, the little kids, who are required by the laws made by the protectors of the gullible to spend their childhood in the barrel so that the protectors of the gullible will always have someone to protect. The protectors also provide the barrel.

Every morning, the Associate Circulation Manager drives Central Control down to the post office. She sits there dearly hoping that you have not moved. She does not entirely approve of moving. And she has dark visions when your Grammarian comes back marked, Address Unknown, Not Even a Trace of You. She hopes that if you must move, a), that someone else is paying, and b), that you will send her your new address.

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 Twelve, Number Three April 1988



Ask a Stupid Question

Greenwich, Conn., April 8, a day to live in infamy—

Children in kindergarten here are learning how to think. Not just to read and write and spell, but to think.

“What’s inside the box?” asks the teacher, Robin Mosely Keffer, holding up a foot-long blue box sealed with tape. The 5-year olds make some wild guesses: an egg, a fake animal, a big book, a balloon, high-heeled shoes, a cookie, spaghetti.

Ms. Keffer passes the box around and lets the children shake it, listen to it, smell it. She prods them to use their “powers of analysis” to eliminate some possibilities. The children decide the object is not a cookie because they could have smelled it. It is not an egg because an egg would have broken. A furry toy animal would not have made the rustling noise heard when the box was shaken.

The children never do guess that the box contains snapshots of them. But the wave of giggles when they peek inside suggests they have savored the thrill of deduction with the zest of Sherlock Holmes. They practiced making inferences and learned how to support their hunches with a well-reasoned argument.

THE people who “report” on “education” are generally a sorry lot, and a splendid example of the terrible things that will happen to you if you give teachers all that respect they think they deserve. How fondly they beam on any silly notion that comes from a schoolteacher who just loves children. The stuff above is from yet another article on the Great Thinking Revolution, this one by a certain Joseph Berger, reporting “special to the *New York Times*.” If you ever run into him, invite him to play poker.

Somehow, he manages to detect “the thrill of deduction” in a bunch of kids who have lost a game of Twenty Billion Questions, and who have, quite appropriately, giggled at its silliness. Did Ms. Keffer explain it to him, or did he figure out for himself that it was out of “well-reasoned argument” that the kiddies figured out what something was not? Has he never heard of hardboiled eggs, or thought of wrapping a furry animal in crinkly tissue? How long since he sniffed a cookie box? Did he ask any questions at all, or did he join in the game? And did his teacher give him a golden star, an A for effort?

Plato understood guessing as the least, primitive stirring of the desire to know and understand, and the one most natural to children, dreamers, and madmen. (There were no education reporters in his day.) In people who want to think, guessing is a very bad habit indeed. It leads to confabulation, and to that illusion of thinking in which a wrongness is excused because, with nothing more than a little bit of luck, it might have been right.

The problem with all the Thinking teachers is that they show no sign of having thought about thinking. For them, it is obviously just about anything that goes on in whatever you want to call mind. It is not by *thinking* that one discovers what is in a box. It is by looking in the box. One who “concludes” by “well-reasoned” argument that it is neither a rhinoceros nor a river has neither reasoned nor argued, but he has done the only sort of thing that can be done in response to a stupid question. Nor does he, unless he is insane, truly expect to answer the question by the process of elimination. If you ask people enough such stupid questions, you can probably make them insane. Maybe that’s what the Thinking Revolution is meant to do.

Consider the nifty questions in the box on the next page. (From the same article.) Read and ponder. How else, after all, will you be able to figure out what these people imagine that they mean by “the critical-thinking method”? Overlook, if you can, that mere fact that those “last words” were not somebody’s last words at all, but try simply to decide what these twits might mean by the word “rephrase.” If those things in column B are “rephrasings” of column A, there probably is a rhinoceros in the box.

Next, try to decide what information would be needed to “answer” the “questions” in column B,

and whether thoughtfulness or guessing would be provoked in the answerer. Just how many “modern-day counterparts” can you name? How well-acquainted are you with the mysteries of their hearts? Now go ahead and draw your shopping mall. Then draw it bigger. As to exactly how much bigger to make it, don’t worry. Here, as always, one guess is as good as another.

Rephrasing Questions to Make Pupils Think

These examples show how teachers can phrase the same questions traditionally to elicit one correct answer, or rephrase it to provoke thought and discussion using the critical-thinking method.

Traditional

“Give me liberty or give me death” were the last words of: Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry or Benjamin Franklin.

Rephrased

Analyze a modern-day counterpart to the Sons of Liberty. What are the similarities, what are the differences?

Traditional

Draw a scale model of a local shopping center.

Rephrased

Draw a scale model projecting your local shopping mall into the year 2025, based on predictable changes in population and consumer needs.

Traditional

Identify the managers of the New York Mets.

Rephrased

What Qualities did Casey Stengel and Davy Johnson share that produced winning performances?

Now, if you have enough information to “answer” the third “question,” first give yourself a big demerit for being an underemployed trifler, and then recite some generalizations and platitudes, easily to be learned in any local barroom, along with more guesses, until your teacher can boast that he has taught you to think.

There is a shifty business going on here, of course. We are expected to believe that the questions in column B are “better” than the niggling little questions in column A, that they are

more than mere tests of the mere remembering of mere information. And, for the schoolers, if not for the schooled, they *are* better, because they have no right answers. Schoolers prefer not to be held to anything at all, and they disarm criticism by preaching that correct answers are possible only in trivial matters, and that where such a great matter as Thinking is concerned, all answers are OK. Indeed, even answers that are just plain wrong in trivial matters will do just fine as thinking.

You can't believe *that*, can you? Well, try this, as reported by Berger:

"Even in teaching mathematics, some proponents suggest instructors can move away from the assumption that there is always one correct answer. Instead, they say, students should be encouraged to explain how they arrived at a different answer.

(Take a little time out just now, and consider what an "assumption" is. Try to find some principle by which to distinguish the sorts of questions that do have a "correct answer" from those that don't. Consider further what he is actually up to who would like us to believe that we only "assume" that there is one correct sum at the bottom of a column of figures. Consider further whether you would like to try selling that notion to the IRS, and the great ease with which Thinking Consultants have sold it to the people who grant their grants and pay their salaries.)

And now give ear to the words of Ira Ewan, who is nothing less than the whole head of New York's Reasoning Skills Unit, as reported without any trace of a smirk by Berger. "Mr. Ewan said he could accept 6 as a plausible answer to 'What is 27 divided by 5?' if the student provided a reasonable explanation."

"A student, he said, might calculate that 27 chips divided into piles of 5 each will yield 6 piles, even though one of the piles is shorter than the other."

And that's the Head of Reasoning in New York. Explains a lot. Poor guy has piles problems—doesn't hear his own words. Just two words later, piles of each become piles not of each.*

* This is what Theatatus is talking about when he reports to Socrates that the philosophers of Ephesus are "at war with the stationary." It is a regular attribute of bad thinking that its terms are slippery, that "gifted,"

And then there is another great thinker, one David Perkins, co-director of a cognitive skills project at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, a very strange place. When "critical-thinking apostles" teach a lesson on the Boston Tea Party, he explains, they rightly eschew the mere recitation of facts, and choose rather to have the students imagine themselves as colonists. "Then they have to consider alternatives of protest like boycotting tea or sinking the boat." Whether they are to do this utterly without knowledge of any facts, he does not specify.

His lesson on the Tea Party is the same old educationist game, another how-would-you-feel-if exercise in the good old Affective Domain. He says—they all do—that "a great deal of research in cognitive psychology shows that the more actively you process information, the more you retain it." But he does not say what it *means*, "actively to process information." We would like to suppose that he will admit that the processing of information, either the active or the other kind, can not be expected in the absence of information, but we're not counting on it.

Except for education reporters, it is not hard at all to imagine some of the questions that should be put to Twenty Billion Questions teachers and Cognitive Skills Gurus who can not keep track of their own words. What do you mean, exactly, when you use the word "thinking"? Is a daydream, or a fantasy of being a colonial, the same as thinking? Is there no difference, except in "rephrasing," between a guess and a hypothesis? Is rapping thinking? When Ira Ewan cooks up a scenario by which he would pronounce a wrong answer right, is he doing what you call thinking? When a teacher "rephrases" an order to draw a shopping mall into an order to draw some other shopping mall, is it an act of thinking? Is there some necessary relation between thinking and information, which might, for instance, preclude thinking in cases where there is not enough information; or can we think about anything we like, whether we know anything about it or not? Is your thinking of such a nature that it might be shown right or wrong, unlike the results of

for instance, can mean one thing in one grant proposal and quite another thing in the next. Consider, in this article alone, how many meanings these folk have assumed in the word "thinking."

division? Would you say of Ira Ewan's hypothetical student that his *answer* might be wrong, but that his *thinking* is just fine?

Is there some essential, and perhaps even democratic, pluralism in your idea of thinking? Is it just anything that goes on "in the head," anything from Ms. Keffer's decision to put pictures and not cockroaches into the box, to the coach's gameplan? And if it is not just anything that you have in mind, exactly what is it that is not thinking. Could you give a few examples of acts that go on "in the head" that you do not mean when you talk about "thinking"?

What distinctions do you make between thinking and this "critical" thinking that you keep talking about? Can you make any such distinctions at all until after you have decided exactly what it is you mean by the first? Would your distinctions enable us to discover that a certain conclusion may be the result of plain thinking, but that critical thinking would provide another? If you were to make such distinctions, by which kind of thinking would you make them, and by which kind ought we to judge them?

And what about Problem Solving? Is it the same as thinking? The same as critical thinking? Are all the products of thought solutions, or only some? How can we tell? Are all solutions provisions of meaning, or only some? How can we tell? If they are the same thing, why do you use both terms? If they are different things, which will you use, and why, to answer these questions?

To such questions, and other such beyond counting, there are no answers in either the theory or the practice of the Thinking Educationists. It would be good, perhaps, to require answers of them, but it would be even better to know that they have no answers. And who is to ask these questions, not into the empty air, as we do, but before the public, so that all can study and consider what these people do and why?

Not the *New York Times*, obviously. But who knows? Maybe they know what they're doing. Plain and simple truth will seldom make news that is fit to print.

The Real Thing

NEVERTHELESS, it is possible to teach little children to do some thinking, although it would help those who undertake it to come up with a

better word, and thus a better thought, than "teach." Thinking often comes about, especially in those not habitually given to thoughtfulness, by some event better understood as a provocation than a lesson.

Here is an example of such a provocation. It has all the elements that the educationists say they want in their thinking teaching. It relates to a current issue; it is relevant to everybody's life; it could be put forth as a "consciousness-raising" exercise; and it is even suitable for the seventh-grade rap session. But they still won't like it.

It begins, as thinking always begins, with a statement; and it is made up, as thinking always is, of statements about that statement, and statements about the statements about that statement. That can be done only in language, of course, but it doesn't require any unusually great skill in language. Simple attentiveness, in fact, is even more important than the skill.

Now for the statement with which to begin. It will sound familiar, not because it is especially nicely put, but because the idea it expresses is familiar:

"It is simply unjust to place people in dehumanizing social conditions, to do nothing about those conditions, and then to command those who suffer, 'Behave—or else!'"

While the man who put it that way is eminent, there is nothing special about his way of putting it. Countless others could have said the same. Therefore, a lesson in thinking about that statement must not become a lesson in the power of authority. Indeed, anyone who would lead children into thoughtfulness must *never* cite authority, or identify in any way the source of a statement to be considered. It will never fail that children, of whatever age, will first react to what they hear, which is bad enough, and thereafter react, if they happen to know it, to the party or persuasion of the speaker. Let them attend only to the words.

The words at hand happen to state a well-known sentiment or belief, one that even children will recognize, and probably even approve. No child is unaware of the existence of injustice, and very few indeed will account for their own misfortunes in any other way. But the teacher of thinking must not let expressions of approval, or disapproval, replace the thinking. The end of thinking is not the discovery of the *right* sentiment that will drive out

the *wrong* one, but only the discovery of the meaning of a statement. Until that is clear, no sentiment is appropriate.

The teacher must stick to the words. The words form a sentence. A sentence is about something, or someone. We can understand sentences most readily when we “know the subject,” which is the only context in which that tired old phrase is useful.

So, the first question—and all of this must be done in questions—is, “What, my dear students, is the subject of this sentence?” Even dull students will see that the subject is “It.” But the question, “What, exactly, is It,” is not so easy to answer. It might take one of the brighter students to see that “It” is the same as “to place,” “to do,” and “to command.” That, while quite correct, is not an answer that brings a sudden burst of clarity to the mind.

Since anyone who will pass himself off as a thinking teacher will have to be expert in language, and always attentive to it, this would be a good place to ask the children whether they have just discovered something important about writing, to wit, that a sentence is easier to make sense of if its grammatical subject is a good match with what might be called its “topic.”

And, indeed, a statement that at first seemed clear, will suddenly seem less clear to people who notice that its topic seems to be a combination of placing, and doing, and commanding. All of them, verbs. So the teacher can now ask the children to look around in the sentence for the subjects of those verbs, the people who are the placers, the people who are the doers, and the people who are the commanders. Is there some child so dull as not to discover that those people do not seem to be anywhere in the sentence?

In such an inquiry, the teacher will be heeding a principle that is at once grammatical, rational, and, for those of a pragmatic turn of mind, perfectly realistic. There are certain things that can be done only by people, and that can not even be named without implying people, and the greatest clarity of statement, therefore, will be achieved when the subject of every verb that implies people is clearly visible.

The children will see this for themselves if the teacher asks them to decide, for instance, whether the placers, doers, and commanders are to be understood as the same people in each case. As to

this, they will find no clue, and some of them may even notice that they had assumed the same subject for each verb, but, now obviously, without any justification for the assumption in the sentence. Interesting.

Now, oh joy, the teacher can let the children be creative. “Where would we stand,” he can now ask, “if we were clear as to who did what?”

“Let’s make another statement, as close to that one as we can get, but naming someone with every verb.” He might offer the first example himself. The children will soon get the hang of it.

“Henry places people in dehumanizing conditions; Harvey does nothing about it; Harold commands them to behave; this is injustice.”

Now the children can be asked to suppose that the first three statements are all true. What then can be said of the fourth, and what is *its* subject? This sort of question can lead to lively discussion in children. One of them will sooner or later point out that while Henry and Harvey may have forfeited the right to expect decent behavior of those “people,” the same can not be said of Harold. This will eventually lead to the entertaining idea that crimes of the “people” committed against Henry and Harvey are nothing less than what those two deserve, but the same is not true in the case of Harold. And, come to think of it, who are those “people”? Could Harold perhaps be one of them, another victim of the oppression of Henry and the neglect of Harvey?

Since no modern child’s consciousness remains unraised, it will be clear to them all that the statement is about an Issue, and that the speaker of those words didn’t really want them to put specific persons into the empty slots. Certain classes were intended, and the children know which. But when the presumed classes are put into the statement, strange new questions will appear. If the haves, for instance, have no right to demand good behavior of the have-nots, whom they have oppressed, must the have-nots also abandon that demand? Is it still an injustice if some of the have-nots command other have-nots, Behave—or else? And what about those, haves or not, who do do something about “those conditions,” the speaker himself, for instance? Is it unjust for him to command a certain behavior of the have-nots because he is, after all, one of the haves, or can he justly make that command because he is *not* one of the neglecters?

And such questions will lead to others even more entertaining. Might there be some have-nots who also put “people” into “dehumanizing conditions,” and then “do nothing about it”? What just expectations can *they* have as to the behavior of “people”? And suppose—children love this sort of thing—that some have-not manages to place some of the haves in dehumanizing conditions, and does nothing about it? Is he to be excused for having done that for which those who have done the same to him are not to be excused?

And so forth. Much of this can be done at the first lesson. The rest of the year can go on with other necessities, like the testing of terms for consistent meaning, and asking, “If this is true, what else must be true?” It’ll be fun. Even the teacher might learn something of worth. But it will never come to any conclusions that will support any agenda, so they are not going to do it.



The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Twelve, Number Four May 1988



The Accidental Teacher

The good composition teacher should be an ignorant man. Not merely profoundly ignorant. He should also be superficially ignorant. He should not only lack wisdom; he should lack information. He needs his students’ help. Because he needs their help, he gets it. The courses he teaches reach him. The students he teaches teach him. He should not know—and should not care to know—who in his classroom the teacher is.

He is a selfish man. He is curious, and his intent is to gratify his curiosity. He teaches by accident.

He believes in the question. He does not believe in the merely relevant question. He believes in the question that has the power to excite an answer.

THOSE are the words of S. Leonard Rubinstein, of whom you have almost certainly never heard. He is a retired professor of English who taught at Pennsylvania State University, and the author of several books, one of them called, much to our interest, *Writing: A Habit of Mind* (William C. Brown Co., Dubuque Iowa, 1972).

We came to hear of him only by a strange accident. In an interview with a surprisingly thoughtful young man who writes essays on education and schooling for the *New York Times*, our Associate Circulation Manager said that he made it a rule in his classroom never to ask the students a question to which he already knew the answer. And, by simple justice, he forbids the students to tell him, in their essays, anything that he already knows.

His methods have not gained wide approval from the teaching profession. So he was delighted to hear from Rubinstein, who had read the piece in the *Times*, and, probably out of loneliness, could not resist sending along some of his own work. He included a couple of pages from *W:AHOM*, the beginning of a chapter called “Honesty is a Skill.” The title is enough to provoke much useful reflection, but a marked passage was even more provocative:

How does my voice as a teacher—how is my voice teacherish?—affect your voice as a student—how is your voice studentish? Do you believe that I, as a teacher, ask *genuine* questions: that is, questions to which I do not know the answers? Or do you believe that they are only tests or tricks? How does your answer affect your voice?

We wonder: is there in this land a teacher academy where the art of teaching (is it an art?) is actually *considered*, or is it, as we suspect, everywhere *described*? When a teaching teacher asks a teaching student, “What is teaching?” is it a genuine question, or does he already have an answer, so that he may the more easily grade the test?

The school people seem content, and perhaps they should be, to understand teaching as the imparting of information and the demonstrating of skills. Not bad things. But in the gathering of information and learning of how to do things, a

teacher is more an accessory than an essential. If information is to be gathered, one teacher will usually do as well as another, and a book or two will do even better than a thousand teachers. In the learning of skills, the best teacher in all the world can not do the work of an hour of practice, although he may well have some good ideas about how to practice.

There is something, well, minimal, about the understanding of teaching in the schools. It is show and tell, but, in the teachers' case, for pay.

To tell your students four principal causes of the French Revolution, and then to test their memory of what you have told them seems an empty exercise, meager. For *that* we need a teacher, and a school? But, if there must be diplomas, there must be schools; if schools, grades; if grades, tests; if tests, false questions asked by people who are not curious about answers. A sad business.

But teaching and learning did not come into the world with the invention of schools. In fact, in our time and place, a plague of schools, all claiming highly technical and arcane powers, has brought us to the day in which there is surely less teaching and learning among us than among the cave-painters of Lascaux. To their children, and to each other, they had no end of information to impart, and perhaps information every bit as important as the principal causes of the French Revolution. They had skills to teach, and to learn, and to keep teaching, and to keep learning. If they had had a system of public schools, they would have, like us, been told to see themselves as mere laymen, and would have handed the young over to the "professionals" to teach them everything from good manners and hiding from tigers to cave-painting. The good manners, and the cave-painting, would soon have ceased among them. Hiding from tigers would have continued.

Teaching and learning are not professions or trades. They are conditions, or estates, to which all persons are open. They are the perpetual exchange of our wonder and all its fruits. They are like mourning or rejoicing, or thank you and please, or falling strangely silent when the moon shines on the snow. They happen.

Dewey said it (you'd think they'd know): "The mountains do not stand on the earth; they *are* the earth." If there are human beings, teaching and learning will happen among them; they *are*, all of them, teachers and learners. And they are only

incidentally divulging information and imparting skills. The good father teaches the son to mix the red ochre not that it might be mixed—the son is a learner, not a tool—but because it is right to teach, and because there is a right way, and because the son must know it to teach his son. The father does not say, I teach, and you, down there, you learn. He says, Let us do what is right. And should the son do it better, the father will learn.

Teaching and learning are two of the many "natures" possible to all persons. And, like our other natures, they are subject to disease. Consider the teacher, in school or anywhere else, who will not learn. An ugliness. And the learner, in school or anywhere else, who will not teach. A curse. You know them. Be thankful. There is justice. In countless shabby, stuffy rooms, they exchange with each other empty questions and answers, all stored up, long ago, in the back of the book.

But, to speak carefully, there can be no teacher who does not learn, or learner who does not teach, any more than there can be people who breathe only in, not out. Who will not do both will do neither. And that, of course, is precisely the melancholy condition of multitudes. Can that have something to do with our strange belief that teaching and learning are what they do in the schools, and that the rest of us had better stay away from them?

Maybe teaching and learning are like loving. Perfectly natural, but still, always accidental. Not to be planned. We teach and learn because we happen to be living here with each other, and trying, once in a while, to live right.

The Fourth Learning

The National Assessment of Educational Progress has shown that only 20 percent of graduating high school students can write a decent letter to a supermarket manager to convince the manager that he or she should get a job. Only 12 percent can arrange six common fractions in size order. Only 4.9 percent can figure out which bus or train to take from Philadelphia in order to get to Washington, D. C., on a given day at a given time. And remember, these are the "successful" students who are still in school after the dropouts are gone.

...Will better teacher training, attracting even better teachers, and getting better textbooks—all of which are important—be enough to increase the percentage of students who learn the above skills from 4.9 percent and 20 percent up to 65, 70 or 80 percent? Can it be that only 4.9 percent of us were created smart enough to read a timetable and 20 percent smart enough to write a good letter?

I think the answer... is “no.” It’s more likely that we’re getting such poor results because schools are organized in a way that prevents most kids from learning. For example, we all know that each and every person learns at a different rate. ... [And here begins a pitch for an infinity of alternatives to teaching, including, but not limited to: “video tapes, audio tapes, computer programs, individual or small group coaching, peer tutoring, simulation games and actual trips to various places to get direct experiences,” the latter, no doubt, from Philadelphia to Washington.]

ALL of that is from one of Albert Shanker’s agitprop columns in the *New York Times*. We’re sorry to give you so much of it, but we had to. Think of it as a test. If a siren went off in your head in the second sentence of the second paragraph, you pass. If not, pay better attention.

“When a man, especially a man who has something to sell, uses the phrase “we all know,” check for your wallet. He is up to no good. And what we all know, says Shanker, is that everyone “learns” at a different rate. Wouldn’t it be useful to know which of a multitude of popular meanings of “learning” he has in mind, and exactly how precisely he can measure differences in rate?

If your child has not yet “learned” to walk by the age of 17, will Shanker say of him that he just happens to learn at a different rate, and that what you need for him is a few more members of the AFT? Marvin and Matilda have been told to “learn” by Monday the prepositions that take the dative. Matilda does it; Marvin does not. Can you think of some other reasons than relative “rates of learning” for the astonishing fact that only Matilda can recite them? John Stuart Mill has told Albert Shanker to “let no fallacy or incoherence,

or confusion of thought step by unperceived.” Is it “rate of learning” or something else, a reluctance to perceive, perhaps, out of which Shanker will not learn?

Although we have only the one word, learning to walk, learning a list of prepositions, and learning to notice and judge what is hidden in the language in which we must think, are not the same process. They are not even similar, for no one of them will serve, even approximately, to do the work of the others. It is only in the first one that the idea of “rate” makes sense, and even here it permits of only very limited differences; it is not because of some natural variation in rate that a 17-year old has not yet learned to walk.

In the third sort of learning, the idea of “rate” is ludicrous. Many will never learn that; many will learn it often. And the sure teaching of it, no one has ever known.

Judging by the examples that send him off, Shanker must be talking about the second learning, about Marvin and Matilda. Matilda may well have failed to learn the valences of the elements as quickly as Marvin did, but then again, maybe not. In either case, however, to speak of their “rates” of learning is not to speak of a cause, but of what is, in schools, the only visible effect of numerous causes.

The first learning comes with the territory, the nature of the beast. The second and the third do not. They call not only for the deed, but for the will. No person can “teach” another the prepositions that take the dative. Or the valences of the elements. Or, in an interestingly different case, the principle by which to discover whether one fraction is greater than another. Such things can, of course, be told, but never taught. Who would learn them must do it; and who won’t, or can’t, do it, will never learn them. This is not a value judgment, or a condemnation, or a “grade” of any sort; just a fact. If you don’t eat, you will not be nourished.

The second learning requires will, and action. Will is none of a teacher’s business, and the teacher who sets out to cajole Marvin into wanting to learn his prepositions is not a teacher but a molester. And Marvin can see that. But the action is a teacher’s business. If you put yourself forth as a teacher of German, or of anything else, and find yourself uncomfortable with the idea of requiring your students to learn what is to be learned, and of

enforcing upon them the discipline that they have not within themselves, then: a), you have our sympathy; and b), you will have nothing but our contempt, and indeed, the contempt of all thoughtful people, if you stay a day longer in that business.

Schooling is coercion. There are no volunteers on the students' side of the desk. And even the students who don't much mind can see it for what it is.

How many reasons might there be by which to account for the fact that Matilda has learned her prepositions while Marvin hasn't? They are beyond counting, for they must include even the possibility that Marvin's hamster took sick and had to be rushed to the vet. Among that swarm of reasons, is the possibility that Marvin is unable to learn prepositions. What would so disable him, except some extraordinary dullness or disorder of mind? But a mind so disordered would have troubles far greater than the inability to learn prepositions, would be, in effect, "a clear case." Only another disordered mind would require it to learn prepositions. Which then is first to be considered: a sick hamster, a stupendous disorder of the mind, or an absence of will? In ten million Marvins, what proportions will fall into what categories? And, where there is absence of will, what would you try: the enforcement of deed, or an "actual trip" to Heidelberg for some "direct experiences" of prepositions?

Now consider what Marvin tells us about the scores that have given Shanker another weapon in what he thinks of as an "argument" for the endless multiplication of gadgets and union members in the government schools.

So, only twenty percent could convince a supermarket manager to hire them, eh? How many supermarket managers were consulted in the matter, do you suppose? Might it be possible that supermarket managers will look for things that have nothing to do with what schools teach, or, for that matter, should teach? Such things as honesty and earnestness, and even some sign of active will? Who the hell are these NAEPers to tell us, and hosts of children as well, what supermarket managers want? That statistic we will find useful only when the apparatchiki who made the test go away and leave the work to those who know how to do it.

But there is another point. The students to whom this "instrument" was "administered" were, in simple fact, not writing a letter to the manager of a supermarket and hoping to be hired. As to how well they might do the real thing, one guess is as good as another, but anyone who cares to think straight can see that this "instrument" provides no *evidence*. The portentous NAEP assessment, as the students well know, "doesn't count." It is exactly one of the dippy devices that Shanker wants to multiply, a "simulation game." Our guess would be, since we happen to know some of those students, that many of the mock-letter writers gave the task what it deserved.

How else could you account for the score on the third question? Shanker, of course, pretends that this is the result of an inability to "read" a timetable. ("Read" is another of the words that educationists always leave unexamined.) There is no "reading" of a timetable, unless by "reading" you mean telling the letters and numerals one from another. If *that* were the cause of the failure of 95.1 percent of high school graduates, we would be delighted, for it would be the last piece of evidence needed for the execution of Mencken's proposal for the improvement of education in America: the burning of the schools and the hanging of the teachers. But, alas, many high school graduates can distinguish the letters and numerals from one another. And, that being so, and hardly anything more being needed, you can be absolutely certain that at least 95.1 percent of Philadelphia high school graduates with tickets for a rock concert in Washington would have no trouble at all getting there on time. The NAEP instrument is a ticket to nowhere.

We know what they did. You know what they did. It takes an educationist not to know what they did.

And so too, probably, with those wretched fractions. Come on. School is out. Hell, even Albert Shanker says I'm one of the "successful" non-dropouts. So who needs this?

In one way, we're with the students on this one. They are simply presuming, and correctly, that this is more of the Mickey Mouse of high school, the tedious game that only wimpy guidance counselors, much to their discredit, take seriously. They've had hardly any homework, they have passed German without learning the prepositions that take the dative, and physics without learning

much math, and countless courses in rapping and relating without learning anything at all. And as to the snooping instruments of a bunch of educationists in Washington, they just don't give a damn.

In another way, though, we're not on their side. And we are sorry, not about them, but for them. Maybe there is another learning, a fourth learning every bit as much to be distinguished and pursued as the others.

What might we say of him who is content to leave his work, any of his work, and without regard to its reward, ill done? Has he not something yet to learn? What, exactly, is that something? Where and how is it to be learned? From the schoolteachers who will not demand and require of their students even so little as the prepositions that take the dative? From multimedia direct experience, and slides?

And now we see that our numbering is backwards. Who lacks the fourth learning can never have the others.

Sapristi, Lisette! Ce n'est pas l'Underground Grammarian de Monsieur le Baron que tu lis?

If you, too, have been reading another's Underground Grammarian, good. And if you're reading your own, remember that we make it easy to duplicate. Unfold each sheet, copy both sides of both sheets in your local machine, fold them, and you have an Underground Grammarian to give someone. So go forth and do it.

A Tiny Anthology Selected Passages from Various Pieces

by

S. Leonard Rubinstein

THE ability to write does not come from knowledge; it comes from a habit of mind. Knowing how to solve what has been solved is of great help; but the act of writing is the discovery, each time, of how to solve what has not been solved.

Solutions are produced by honesty. An honest man can approach information with confidence, select items with purpose, and accept with courage unpredictable data, however destructive

to his preconceptions. Honesty is being true to curiosity.

ALL men know their reactions; few men can identify what they are reacting to. The skill of honesty is to hold one's reaction at bay in order to discover what is causing it.

IF you are concerned with the health of what you are saying, you are eager for criticism, criticism to direct your attention to areas where you can make decisions, decisions to improve the health of what you are saying. Of course, if you are concerned with the health of your vanity, criticism has all the power to harm that your vanity gives it.

EVERY person who recognizes and isolates a part of his life as an experience is a craftsman. His craft is fiction.

THE compulsion to tell everything does not prove that you have information; it proves that you lack discrimination. The perception of meaning is commentary on chaos: facts are chaos until they have been selected, isolated, combined: meaning is the juxtaposition of evidence.

EMOTIONAL writing almost guarantees that the reader will *not* react emotionally. Being *excited* is not being *exciting*. A writer with the power to excite emotions coldly examines his own passions to discover what ignited them. If he identifies and assembles the details that stimulated his emotions, they will stimulate the reader's. The writer causes responses. He does not obscure the causes by reporting his own responses.

TO say what one thinks is to discover what one thinks.

Since the April issue appeared in May, it seemed good to have the May issue appear in June. The September issue, of course, will appear when it should—in August. Till then we say Goodbye for the summer, and Central Control hopes that you will not move, or that you will move only for the summer, or that you will tell her all about it.



The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Twelve, Number Five . . . September 1988



The Panamanian Panda Paradigm

Americans do not understand the world at a time when we face a critical need to understand foreign consumers, markets, customs, strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, our economic future depends on geographic literacy....

Without a thorough grasp of geography, we see the world from our own narrow perspective. ... The world is too competitive and dangerous to be a vague blur of memorized names and places. Without geography, we're nowhere.

WHEN a dairy farmer happens to notice that not one geographer in ten can tell a Holstein from a Guernsey, he may shrug a little shrug, or, if he has acquired the nasty habit of reading op-ed pieces in the *New York Times*, he may even snort a little snort; but he does not break out into pious lamentations about the decline of the west and the end of civilization as we know it. He does not take pen in hand to announce to his fellow Americans that there are cows in Japan too, and that we can hardly expect to compete with the Japanese while mired in dairy illiteracy. He does not wring his hands aloud, gloomily reminding us that we can not hope to understand the peoples and cultures of the world unless we are correctly informed as to their cows. He does not darkly hint that not only prosperity but peace itself will have no chance if our schools continue the deplorable practice of neglecting cow study, which neglect he resoundingly demonstrates by pointing to the indisputable fact that not one school in ten thousand or so offers any cow courses whatsoever. In short, he keeps his own counsel and minds his own business. He is a splendid chap, and we like him a lot.

With geographers, it is otherwise. In fact, with most of those whose callings have become

subjects in school, it is very otherwise. They seem truly to believe that, if they “teach” it, it is universally essential. The exceptions are the ones who impart such skills as accounting and advertising, who seem not at all perturbed that the public in general is unschooled in the tricks they are paid to reveal. Tax preparers do not moan and groan that no ordinary citizen can possibly fill out his simplified return, and plumbers seem never to call for universal plumbing literacy.

But the academic types are withering away in a buyers’ market, and must always be proclaiming that what they can impart is even more important than accounting and advertising, to say nothing of plumbing, and, indeed, that it is “the key” to success in everything else, including accounting and advertising, maybe even plumbing, and also to world peace and the brotherhood of all mankind.

The epigraph above is taken from an op-ed piece in the *NY Times*. It is a lament at once melancholy and condescending by one Gilbert M. Grosvenor, who is the president of the National Geographic Society. It is full of other similar stuff, including the assertion that it was out of an ignorance of geography, rather than greed, that those banks made big loans to little countries with no resources. Those naive bankers just didn’t *know* that bananas don’t grow in sand, and, even worse, it never occurred to them to go out and find a geographer to tell them that.

Grosvenor kicks off his piece by passing on the results of some poll in which some people located “Contras in Norway, nuclear weapons in Switzerland, pandas in Panama, the summer Olympics in Iraq, [and] the United States in Botswana.” These he calls “extreme examples of geographic illiteracy [that] popped out of the mouths of American adults.” The polltakers accosted “10,800 adults in nine countries,” an average of 1200 adults per country, which made it, you should be happy to know, “the largest of its kind.” Wow.

We suspect that it may also have been the *only* of its kind. We suspect, too, that it was commissioned and paid for by people who are neither plumbers nor accountants, and certainly not dairy farmers. And not at all do we wonder who made up the “questions” put by the poll. And we know good and damn well that if the poll had come out the “wrong” way, *i.e.*, without

ammunition for Grosvenor, we would never have heard of it.

For some reason or other, Grosvenor does not tell us exactly how many respondents put the pandas in Panama.

Maybe he wants to protect us from the shock of a dreadful revelation, or maybe something else. It's too bad. Our own reasoning, which is the only thing left for those who can not afford a poll, suggests that the world would be a vastly better place if about twenty-five percent of the adults of nine nations had put the Pandas in Panama.

Consider: There you are, standing around in the shopping mall, minding your own business and hurting no one. Up to you, clipboard in hand, comes one of those smooth kids, working his way through tax preparer school by taking the occasional poll. He is not even a prying busybody in his own right, but only the hired tool of a prying busybody, and neither the lackey nor the master has *your* welfare in mind, but somebody else's. And he puts to you the following question, which must surely have looked like this:

The natural habitat of the Panda is in:

- a) Samoa
- b) Panama
- c) Australia
- d) China
- e) Greenland

Now stop and think. He who asks this question—is he a seeker after truth, panting to know the whereabouts of the panda? He who pays this asker—is he looking for your help?

There is, of course, a more or less correct answer, but a thoughtful person can no more bring himself to check off a more or less correct answer than Baron Rothschild can put ice in his wine. Is there, perhaps, a *just* answer, the answer that, not the question, but the questioner deserves? Of course. In fact, there are four just answers. Thus it follows that in a world of thoughtful people, each of them would have chosen one of those four, which is also to say that about a quarter of them would have chosen Panama. Simple logic.

Alas. If only it had been so.

There are, in fact, people who have no idea where pandas come from, and who don't care, and who, when told by some geographer, will find the information of no special interest. There are even

people who would rather not be told—yet again—where the summer Olympics are to be found, and if there are any who truly don't know, all we can do is envy them.

But in all such matters, we are not truly talking about knowledge—and certainly not about “understanding the world,” which Grosvenor considers dependent on putting the pandas in the right place—but about *information*. Nothing more.

All shortages of information are now called “illiteracies.” In every case, from the now aging “computer illiteracy” to the arriviste “AIDS illiteracy,” these are not in any sense illiteracy, but simply ignorance, ignorance of this or that, the condition in which every one of us, however expert in some other this or that, will spend his entire life. (If plumbers were to lose their minds, they would call all the rest of us plumbing illiterates, and legislatures would give them grants, and they would establish Programs with Guidelines at Centers, and every toilet in the land would be clogged. Is it, perhaps, time for some people to get the hell out of Academe? If the arts and sciences are really so profitable and practical, which seems to be the only defense their professors can come up with, why don't those professors just go out and *practice* their callings, so that they may serve society almost as well as those who can unclog toilets? But enough.)

Now consider this: You are going to imagine three lists. One is a complete list of all of the information you have ever been given, starting with the capitals of the states, and so forth. Be careful. Information is fickle. It is not knowledge. Astronomers can neither discover nor deduce the names of the stars. It is only credulity that makes Grosvenor suppose that there are no atom bombs in Switzerland. And where will the pandas be two or three wars from now, when the contras in Tibet have pushed some borders about?

The second is a list (who could make it?) of the information that you haven't been given. All of it.

The third list contains all of the information that you have discovered for yourself, and that would not have been around for others to hear unless you had discovered it.

Now behold in dismay one little list, one infinite list, and one infinitesimal list. If you suspect, as we do, that there are some contras in Norway, and that those current and temporary Nicaraguans are

merely a particular shadow thrown by the blaze of a permanent principle, be consoled to notice that List Two of Gilbert M. Grosvenor is just as infinite as yours.

While not all geographers, we hope, would hold that the meaning and worth of geography are to be found in the information that some of Grosvenor's pollees seem not to have had, Grosvenor himself shows us that you can "see the world from your own narrow perspective" just as easily *with* a "thorough grasp of geography" as without it.

How, then, should you live? Should you devote your life to moving entries from list two to list one? When you have totted up enough geographical entries, will you thereupon "understand the world," and learn to compete with the Japanese? When you have found out the place of the panda, will that be enough? What about the platypus, the peccary, and the pangolin? How long a list will it take to put the mind in tune, and the reason in frame, to find, in other words, the only condition in which it is possible to understand anything?

Euthyphro Lives!

Of Plato's works, the larger and more valuable portion have all one common end, which comprehends and shines through the particular purpose of each several dialogue; and this is to establish the sources, to evolve the principles, and exemplify the art of METHOD. This is the clue, without which it would be difficult to exculpate the noblest productions of the divine philosopher from the charge of being tortuous and labyrinthine in their progress, and unsatisfactory in their ostensible results. The latter indeed appear not seldom to have been drawn for the purpose of starting a new problem, rather than that of solving the one proposed as the subject of the previous discussion.

WE have suggested to one of our readers that he let his high school students read the *Euthyphro*. He is, of course, a good and thoughtful teacher—why else would he be one of our readers?—and he seems to have some good students in a good school—the principal is actually interested in making sense—but it may nevertheless have been a big mistake.

It may have been the *Euthyphro* that Coleridge had especially in mind when he wrote the words above. In spite of its brevity, it is maddeningly labyrinthine, and in spite of its humor—it is surely one of the funniest of the Dialogues—its "ostensible results" are not just "unsatisfactory," but exasperating.

Socrates is on his way into the courthouse to answer some strange charges that have been brought against him. On the steps, he meets Euthyphro, who is just coming out. Euthyphro, it turns out, has been to court to *bring* some charges. He has charged his own father with homicide, in the death of a recaptured runaway slave who was left tied up in a ditch while those who had captured him, under the direction of Euthyphro's father, finished their day's work. In the heat of the sun, perhaps, or in some other way, the captive died, and Euthyphro can find no alternative but to hold his father accountable.

Socrates either is, or pretends to be, a little bit shocked. My gracious, he says, do you think that you have done the right thing, the pious thing, by charging your own father?

Oh yes, says Euthyphro, I figured it all out very carefully.

You know, then, Socrates asks, how to distinguish the pious from the impious? I wish you would explain it to me, for that is exactly the question with which I am having some trouble.

Well, Socrates, Euthyphro tells him, this is your lucky day, for in this matter I am expert, and I will be very glad to take time to show you how to tell what is right from what is wrong. Where would you like me to begin?

What follows, you can easily imagine. Poor Euthyphro. You can't help but feel sorry for him. Socrates, bland but bemused, or feigning bemusement, keeps asking, But, Euthyphro, didn't you, just a few minutes ago, hold quite the opposite of what you are now saying? And, of course, he did.

Euthyphro's expertise falls to pieces before our eyes, but he doesn't see it that way. To him, it is as though the supposedly wise Socrates has turned out to be a bit of a dunce, and a stubborn one at that. Picky, picky. After all, if you're going to stop and fuss about the meaning of every little word, how can you ever learn anything? He seems to be so interested in tiny details—or is that just a

gimmick?—that he just can't make out the big picture.

At the end of it all, no one has, in a certain sense of the word, “learned” anything. Socrates has not learned how to distinguish a pious act from an impious one; Euthyphro has not learned that he can't make sense. No problem has been solved, no new facts imparted, and no one has been empowered so that he may now go forth and do what he had not been able to do before. In the phrase made famous by a later philosopher, no “cash value” comes out of this bewildering little chat.

But, in another sense, there is much to be learned: that where there is no method, there can only be madness, a persistent and unconscious failure of the mind to make and recognize sense.

Now, the school people are hot to teach thinking, and values. Why? To accomplish, of course, exactly those things that the *Euthyphro* does not accomplish. They want to do something to people and to the world; they want to make something happen. They want to come to some conclusions, to say, There, that's done! Now we can... Fill in the rest for yourself. They want cash value, and the solution of problems.

And they want all of this, along with more respect, as soon as possible.

In schools, the “good” of a study of the *Euthyphro* would be measured by means of this question: What can you now do out there in the world that you couldn't do before? The answer is certain to be unsatisfactory. You can not, apparently, show a fool his folly and bring him into some better condition. You can not decide whether or not a deed is virtuous; you can not, that is to say, now pronounce the “values” that you have come to hold. You certainly can not make a living out of what you may have learned, or hope, if you learn to behave like Socrates, to win friends and influence people, thus maximizing your potential bottom line.

We have come to think of the Dialogues as “lessons,” and easily forget that they are literature. Fiction. Little Plato was not lurking behind one of the pillars of the court when Socrates met Euthyphro, if he ever did. Those two are “characters,” and, like all characters in fiction, chosen and designed to be particular and temporary cases of the universal and permanent. And it is as a case that the *Euthyphro*, and the man

named Euthyphro, might best be studied in school, and by children.

Euthyphro is, after all, the Great Enemy of Children, the fixed and impenetrable mind, which unquestioningly supposes that it knows. He lives in parents and teachers without number, and in the great belief clubs of our time, from the Fundamentalist Right to the Sentimentalist Left. But he has grown since the time of Socrates. Now he is expert on learning disabilities, mental health, right attitude, social and political responsibility, right relating to self and others, and countless forms of consciousness and awareness.

In every time and place, Euthyphro beholds the children. He has plans for them. An agenda. A system. A curriculum, and an edifice. All the ribbons and badges of the sanctioned and official. He hires himself, he elects himself, he reads himself, he believes himself.

In his designs, he has never failed. He always makes enough Euthyphros for the future. But neither does he succeed entirely; his schemes and devices are not truly METHOD, they are madness, which Nature abhors more than the vacuum. Since he can not see his own inner contradictions, he builds in response to particular circumstance, and not in obedience to principle. Thus his beams always need shoring up, and the plaster is always cracking. This wing or that falls into ruin and is abandoned for a new one, with a nifty new name. He can, of course, and probably will, go on patching and painting so long as our kind shall last, but he will never be able to fool everybody. There will always be some to notice—picky, picky—that his corners are not square, and that his pieces do not fit. Should those few fail, then we would discover that the one thing worse than a school system that works badly is one that works well.

So what we hope is that our reader will play the *Euthyphro* for laughs. He should act out the parts, and broadly, so that the students will see that Euthyphro is just another jerk who takes himself seriously. School children are not unacquainted with such. They will be able to name some, too, unless their teacher can stop them. Let him be content that to scorn folly is to distinguish between the better and the worse—an early symptom of the love of wisdom.

Education, which was at first made universal in order that all might be able to read and write, has been found capable of serving quite other purposes. By instilling nonsense, it unifies populations and generates collective enthusiasm. *Bertrand Russell*

The Seepage on the Back

We cannot pretend to answer this question without first taking a good hard look at the society in which our schools are floating, and then thinking of this society as a rather sadly polluted sea in which our schools, as ships, are navigating under severe difficulty, and finding it impossible to completely seal off all the seepage from entering the classrooms on the backs of pupils corrupted by their environment and their inability to divorce themselves from envelopment in unsavory behavior and total indifference to academic achievement, which when considered thoroughly from all viewpoints leads to the conclusion that our schools are doing a commendable job of staying afloat as capably as they do in water not conducive to commendable sailing; in fact... [and lots more such]

WE don't have room for the whole thing, but you can find it in *The New Yorker*, June 20, page 85, under the caption: Sentences, And Metaphors, We Hated To Come To The End Of.

One of our perennial themes arises from what we see as an absolute and essential difference between education and those other conditions which are generally put forth as education: training, socialization, and indoctrination. Of those three, which are the chief business of schooling, the first neither requires nor implies any education at all; the second, however worthwhile and necessary, impedes it; and the third is designed to preclude it.

Education is entirely an inner condition in a person, and, unlike training, it is not really "about" the world outside of the person. It must include—how could it not?—the ability and the propensity to distinguish sense from nonsense, and even more important, to distinguish sense from nonsense not only in others, but in the self. Indeed, if education is "about" anything—and this

is what makes it so unpopular in our schools—it is about the self. In our society, a visible concern for the self, even for the integrity and sanity of the self, is thought selfish.

Now ask yourself what you can say about the author of the passage above. Could he be an effective and successful chemist or physician, or even an investment banker? Certainly. Is there, in the working of his mind, anything that would keep him from making a living as an "educator"? Can you consider his words and say that he can not possibly be a judge or a congressman?

But you can say something about him, and that something is truly about him, and not just about his connections to the world out there. And you can tell something about his connections to the world from all the seepage on his back.

The Underground Grammarian

Post Office Box 203
Glassboro, New Jersey 08028
R. Mitchell, Assoc. Circulation Mgr.

Eight issues a year. One year subscription: Persons in the USA or Canada, \$15US; Persons elsewhere, \$20; non-personal entities of any sort at all, \$25, or maybe even more.

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 Twelve, Number Six October 1988



One Little Reason

YEARS ago, in a passage we'd love to quote but can not find, one of our people wrote about walking down the hall of some junior high school. You pass the room where the seventh-graders are rapping on about abortion, and another where the

kiddies are chewing blubber in order to relate appropriately to the Eskimo experience. Beyond the fire door, at the first turning of the stair, you find a child sitting all alone, reading a book. And then the Thought Question: Identify the deviant, and suggest the appropriate treatment.

This has been one of our perennial themes: an institutionalized hatred—and probably fear—of solitude. That hatred is the root, or maybe the blossom, of what Bernanos called a worldwide conspiracy against the inner life, not truly meaning that conscious conspirators met and plotted—he was a kindly man—but that only on some such ground might we understand what was happening to us all.

We are less kindly, and inclined to imagine that the swine are really doing it all. But no. There is always new evidence that no villain need be, and that passions do spin the plot.

Just now, there is social struggle in Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico. Of the several bones of the battle, one is the fact that there are few jobs of any sort to be found near Tierra Amarilla, a not uncommon disorder. One of the parties to the dispute, a former teacher who would like to open a ski resort in the face of opposition, makes a strange and interesting argument in his cause. Although the schooling of the children is not otherwise at issue, he points out that there is, after all, “little reason to educate the children if there are no jobs for them to fill.” Unfortunately, however, he does not tell us what that one “little reason” might be.

It’s a puzzle. Now, if he had said, as he probably believes, that there is *no* reason to educate children who will find no jobs, we would have been content. Given the almost universal suppositions of our time about “education,” such an assertion would be purely logical. If education is for the getting of jobs, then those who will never get jobs have no need of it. Those children who will spend their lives in unemployment, that is, many children of the rich and many more children of the poor, might best be excused from whatever it is that we call education.

Here, of course, we are not educationists. The educationists, while utterly committed to the first great goal of jobworthiness, will have no trouble at all thinking of other reasons for education, although they will not be too ready to call them “little.” Is intercultural consciousness-raising to be

called “little”? Are environmental and megadeath awarenesses trifles? And what about condoms?

No, no. The educationists will not give us the one little reason, but instead hosts of mighty ones. Surely, the former teacher of Tierra Amarilla will have heard of all those, and just as surely, in a calmer moment, he will admit that, well, yes, all such things are important too, and perhaps especially important to the jobless, who, since they have the time, might just as well spend it worrying about the rest of the world and the possibility that something or other might be poisonous.

Almost everyone we know has a job. The only exceptions are those who are either too young or too old. It is our experience—test it with yours—that almost everyone we know is far better at doing his job than in doing anything else in life. We know an excellent electrician who is an impatient and dangerous driver, a fine accountant who can’t turn down another drink, a good mechanic who is a colossal failure as a parent, a builder of sturdy bridges who is a brutal and selfish husband, an enterprising and successful seller of insurance who is convinced that it is not his job but the government’s job to see to the health of his parents, and a mankind-loving fundraiser for the cause of peace and love who can not manage even to be polite to those members of mankind who just happen to be nearby. They all make good livings, but they don’t live good lives.

Indeed, there are surely millions and millions of us who could truthfully say—but won’t—that there is absolutely nothing in our lives at which we are better than at our jobs. And, more often than not, that will also be to say that our jobs are the only things in our lives that we can do well at all. In all other things, we are, at best, bumbling amateurs.

And there is a good reason for this. Just about any of the jobs our world has to offer, with exceptions far fewer than we would ordinarily suppose, is easy to perform for those who have gotten used to it. Just like car-waxing, neurosurgery gets easier after a bit. And, notwithstanding all the moaning and groaning of those who can be sure that they will be *heard* to moan and groan, most people do most jobs pretty well. You may know one plumber that you like better than another, but you simply can not find a plumber who just doesn’t know how to plumb,

any more than you can find a mechanic who can't do anything at all for a car, or an accountant who can't account. With the obvious exception of those who don't truly have jobs, but only "positions," like school superintendents and members of congress, just about everybody knows how to do his job. (Yes, even schoolteachers, although many of them prefer to do something other than the job while on the job, but in that they are far from unique.)

The tragedy of not having a job is far more than a financial problem. For most in that condition, leaving aside those who will devote themselves to learning the job of crime, to have no job is to be competent at nothing, nothing at all. Not a happy condition.

If you retire after a successful career and live into your seventies, you will have put in about forty years of joblessness. Add it up. Pre-job years, and post-job years. Weekends and holidays. Vacations. The other sixteen hours or so of every day spent "on the job."

And if you are at all like the rest of us, you will have to tack on a few years' of wool-gathering and lollygagging, to say nothing of "relating" and other such hanky-panky. And all the rest of your time, maybe more than half, will have been spent in mere life, at which you never been very good, which you have never undertaken to learn in the way that you learned your job, which you have never taken as seriously as you took your job, and which is, just now, as you gaze idly through the picture-window of the nursing-home arts and crafts room at the bleak sleet of late November, all that you have. Mere life. Not a happy condition.

Should you be spared that condition, it will be for one little reason. You should be so lucky, of course, but the former teacher of Tierra Amarilla will probably not. The only education there can be—all that other stuff is just training, or information, or indoctrination—the education of the inner life, has somehow or other just slipped his mind. All unconscious, he has joined the worldwide conspiracy of the unconscious.

Gone in a Minute

"Kids who are young like we had seem not to like that stuff, yet it was gone in a minute," Snyder said. "I watched to see if they were throwing food away and they

weren't. Whether they liked it or not, they finished it. And that's a way of learning."

The Globe-Times, Bethlehem, Pa.,
August 3, 1988

THAT DOES IT! This is it. We promise. Never again, never, never, never again, will we do a piece about the weird connection between the school people and the pushing of edible substances into the faces of their students. Frankly, the topic is disgusting, and if it weren't for our devout commitment to journalistic integrity and the public's inalienable right to know everything that is seamy and trivial, we would never have done it in the first place.

The first place, as best we can remember, was about ten years ago. We had a piece about a porseffor of ecudation at Glassboro State College, the nearby state mental institution, with which, by the way, this sheet has absolutely no business in common. The fellow was teaching a graduate course in ecudation which foisted upon its helpless and hapless students not only mouths-on experience in the development of cultural awareness through the gobbling of the foods of many lands, but feet-on experience as well, in the festive gyrations of ditto, but performed, alas, without benefit of the culturally specific, and truly necessary, intoxicants of those many lands.

(That's the curiously selective and tepid tolerance of those school people. Yeah, they'll gag down the blubber and the sheep's eye to prove that all cultures are really nifty and just as good as any others, but it obviously seems to them otherwise when it comes to lending out their wives and cutting off the hands of thieves. They'll smear on the war-paint, all right, but they'd rather not mention its purpose. And the bigots will simply *not* go home and barbecue their dogs. Enough already. This topic, as you can see, brings on hysteria.)

Well, we're sorry. At the time, we thought it was funny. But we thought also—what a big mistake!—that it would be, in effect, "gone in a minute," that it was just another of those countless passing fads that grind and gurgle their ways through the twisted guts of American schooling, and that it would soon be flushed away, along with the suvlaki and enchiladas. But we did not know then the true, and exceeding strange nature of the educationistic alimentary tract, which turns

out to have, all contrary to nature, at one end a gaping and capacious maw, lacking taste buds, and, at the other, no means of egress at all, leaving the entire system always in a condition for which the only accurate description is a brief phrase, three little words, which our style sheet, alas, does not permit. But any reader who has spent some time in the low company of crass anti-intellectuals who persist in calling things by their names will be able to supply it.

Well, as somebody said, it is not the stuff that goes into the mouth, but the stuff that comes out that counts. So we come at last to the words of one David Snyder quoted above. Snyder is a position-holder at Lehigh University, which is probably near Bethlehem, Pa. He is a “program director,” and the program that he directs takes in (in every sense of the phrase, and probably for a fee) a batch of “gifted and talented” children, a category into which entry is of course accorded on democratic principles, lest programs and directors starve.

Snyder directed his program into West African fruit salad, Minehaha cake with raisin and walnut frosting, and English trifle with strawberries and cream, along with other treats “from”—the word must be read metaphorically; the stuff really came from gifted and talented mothers’ kitchens at home—Greece, Poland, Hungary, South Africa, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Russia, and the Philippines.

The consequent discoveries were a bit less than monumental. “The kinds of food that can be raised and grown in a specific climate will inextricably affect [*sic*] the cuisine of any region.” Wow. “Students discussed all aspects (*all?*) of cultures and explored the possibilities for global communities.” Yeah.

Reporters are easily suckered by the antics of schoolers. This one ends her piece with this bizarre conclusion:

“The food buffet was just one way of learning the intricacies of culture. Judging by the expressions on the faces of the children, and the swift consumption of the food—these were lessons well learned.”

What so you suppose we would discover if we could track down that reporter—or, better yet, Snyder—and ask for enumeration and elucidation of the antecedents of the pronoun “these”?

It was Aristotle, we think, who said, somewhere, that the study of astronomy is the noblest study of all, but that the student of astronomy should be very careful not to look at the stars. It seems silly, but it is a reminder that the *meaning* of our experience (always gone in a minute) is often elusive, and that what we understand is not the direct result of what we observe, but the result of our thoughtful consideration of what we have observed. And it is not quite so silly as its modern, educationistic counterpart: Go out and look at the stars all night and rap about their intricacies which so inextricably affect the look of the sky. And keep smiling, to show that the lesson is well learned.

Patting the Cheese

- ❖ School learning lays stress on individual cognition, while learning in virtually every context tends to be a cooperative enterprise.
- ❖ School learning stresses “pure thought,” while the outside world makes heavy use of tool-aided learning.
- ❖ School learning emphasizes the manipulation of abstract symbols, while nonschool reasoning is heavily involved with objects and events.
- ❖ School learning tends to be generalized, while the learning required for on-the-job competency tends to be situation-specific.

THOSE are apparently quotations, by columnist William Raspberry, of the “insights” of one Lauren Resnick. Who and what she is, we don’t know, but she revealed her insights in an article in last December’s issue of *Educational Researcher*, which is probably not on your coffee table.

Raspberry is hot on Resnick. He says that she, like all the great poets and prose stylists, “tells us what we already ‘know’ but could never quite find the words to express.” He must mean the *really* expressive words, like “nonschool” and “tool-aided,” we guess, because it is hard to imagine anyone who could not find *that* collection of words, and, alas, even harder to imagine one who, having found them, would straightway strike them out.

“Resnick isn’t sure what to make of her conclusions,” Raspberry reports, “except that the present educational reforms, geared toward

enhancing traditional school learning, may be missing the boat. It may be that school learning itself needs to be reconsidered—and restructured.”

We, on the other hand, are sure what to make of her conclusions. Simple. She’s been watching too much television. Even the commercials. She has this notion that doing a job is something like the morning meeting in *LA Law*, or the dinner-table discussions of blow-dried Yuppies who hope, this time, to come up with the right telephone system. She has a sweet vision of working for a living, where eager beavers are brainstorming, and wise elders gently leading the promising young into nonschool reasoning.

In fact, if you will stop ten people on the street and ask them about their jobs, you will find nine people who can do their jobs in their sleep, and who wish that that could somehow be arranged. They sort, they fix, they find, they put away, they copy, they push, they recite, they carry, they listen, they tell, they stamp, they gather, they throw away, and at quitting time they quit. For almost anybody in America, or anywhere else, that’s what it means to work for a living.

When a department head shows the new sales clerk how to work the cash register, we do not see an event that needs to be inflated into “learning by cooperative enterprise,” but if we do so inflate it, we must do the same when a teacher shows a new student how to find a bathroom. Those who use calculators instead of doing sums in their heads—“pure thought,” we guess—are not making “heavy use of tool-aided learning.” They don’t have to *learn* a damn thing; nor should they. All they have to do is punch the right buttons. And ditto for computers. As to mere reasoning, and that other “reasoning,” called “heavily involved with objects and events,” we do wonder what distinction the lady has in mind, for it seems to us that any reasonable conclusion as to objects and events must be reasonable, and the result of the “mere” reasoning.

Maybe she is confused about those “abstract symbols,” and so unable to see that when the checker in the supermarket decides not to put the six-packs on top of the eggs, it is out of attention to the abstractions of heaviness and fragility. If it weren’t so, the trainee’s list of what not to put on top of what would be a long one. If “the learning of on-the-job competency” were “situation-specific,” there would be endless lists to be

memorized in just about every calling. As in school.

Nobody “reasons” about objects and events. It just can’t be done. We can reason only with what we can say about objects and events. If we can say things about objects and events, it is because they have attributes, by virtue of which they are like other objects and events, and also unlike other objects or events. By virtue of their likenesses and differences, we can make and test analogies. By reference to those analogies we can draw conclusions and act appropriately. If all of that sounds like a mess of “abstract symbols” of the kind that do not meet the needs of the marketplace, go back and consider again the girl who decides, even in the absence of a situation-specific list, and without a bit of cooperative enterprise, that she had better not put the beer on top of the eggs. In her reasoning about objects and events, she has been through all the “abstract symbols” listed above.

To make her case, Resnick cites a certain nonschool Weight Watcher who was asked to use three quarters of two thirds of a cup of cottage cheese. “He used a measuring cup to find two thirds of a cup. Then he patted the cheese into an approximately round pancake, divided it into quarters, and used three of the quarters... Very probably, the individual never knew, or cared, or needed to know that he was about to eat half a cup of cottage cheese.”

(That “very probably,” by the way, is superbly typical of the meaning of the “science” in “social science,” all of whose circles are “approximately round,” and that blithe assumption of what somebody else “needs to know” is typical of the politics of the educationists. Now we know what she is.)

If Resnick is not just patting some of her own cheese into an approximately round circle, but really telling the truth, then there is a vicious maniac out there telling Weight Watchers to use three quarters of two thirds of a cup of cheese, and at least one moronic Weight Watcher who says, “Duh... oh kay.” And what a remarkable stroke of luck she had in finding exactly the right vicious maniac, and not the other guy who tells people to use three quarters of two thirds of a cup of powdered sugar, or his cousin, the olive oil specialist.

For Raspberry, the cheese fantasy shows “the difference between pure symbol manipulation (school) and contextual reasoning (nonschool).” Pure bunk. What it shows us is the difference between the power to calculate (roughly) the volume of a soggy wad of cheese, and the ability to calculate (exactly) anything. And that is nothing less than the difference between a kind of enslavement and a kind of liberty. If there are jobs in the world that require only the former, and have no use at all for the latter, the reaming out of sewer pipes, for instance, or the selling of stocks and bonds, Raspberry would not want to be trapped in one of them, but he doesn’t mind at all that millions of others should have to bear them. A reformer.

Actually, the schools are much more like the world of jobs than Resnick seems to know. There, too, the situation-specific, the “relevant” “meeting of needs,” is cherished, and so too the cooperative enterprise of the rap session and the awareness ritual. And if, as Albert Shanker puts it in his own endorsement of the Insights of Lauren Resnick, school is the place where “asking others for help is called cheating,” then that is the school that the followers of Shankers have made, in docile obedience to the competitive world of jobs, and not that possible school where the learning comes before the jobworthiness.

So what is the name of that boat that Raspberry fears we may be missing? Easy. Child Labor—the latest fad of the Makers of the World into a Better Place. School as workplace and holding tank for the little trainees who don’t even have to be paid.

We love it. There is a tangy scent of Justice in the air when shabby thinking, patting the soggy cheese of the situation-specific, turns whining reformers into unwitting reactionaries.

The Underground Grammarian

Post Office Box 203

Glassboro, New Jersey 08028

R. Mitchell, Assoc. Circulation Mgr.

Eight issues a year. One year subscription:
Persons in the USA or Canada, \$15US;
Persons elsewhere, \$20; non-personal
entities of any sort at all, \$25, or maybe
even more.



The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Twelve, Number Seven . . . November 1988



Watching the Moon

Sadler dramatically proved his point last year when he took a camera crew into the closely cropped Harvard Yard during June commencement—right up to the beaming students in caps and gowns, newly ushered into the ranks of the certainly educated. He asked them why the earth is hotter in summer. Only one in twenty got it right.

WE seem to have conjured this fellow up. Just last month we mentioned, a bit sheepishly, with reluctant admiration, Aristotle’s suggestion that the student of astronomy be careful not to look at the stars. Now we have met Phil Sadler, who is identified for us only as someone who “is working on a project at the Harvard Center for Astrophysics,” and now we would like to apologize for having been sheepish. Aristotle was just plain right.

Sadler’s darling project, funded, of course, by the National Science Foundation, is called STAR, for thus it is that scientists derive an acronym from “science teaching through its astronomical roots,” which, for the rest of us, would seem to provide STTIAR. But no matter. Cute is what counts. What STAR proposes, and intends to institute as widely as possible, is a “year-long, full-blown course focusing on three areas: the nature of light (how light helps determine distance size and temperature (of stars, we guess)); the laws of nature (physics); and space and time (seasons, motion, scale, distance).”

It will be, of course, a “hands on approach” to the heavenly bodies. It will have the kiddies, for instance, keeping a journal of the time and place of the setting of the sun for three months. They will build little telescopes with plastic lenses and paper towel tubes, they will make nifty little celestial spheres, and, most wonderful of all, they will get many a chance to put aside books and to

spend time in the ancient, mysterious pastime of poets and seers—watching the moon.

“For the first time in their lives,” says a teacher who is piloting STAR, “a lot of my kids went out and actually watched the moon. It’s hard to believe, but a lot of them hadn’t done that.”

Rubbish. It’s not at all hard to believe. It’s a weird and unusual child indeed who has truly *watched* the moon, and probably a poet or seer in the making. “Watching” the moon is like watching the grass grow. It is not at all the same as *seeing* the moon, or even as *looking at* the moon. Nor is charting the place of its rising the equivalent of “watching the moon,” for it requires only looking at it at a certain time and making a mark, as countless of our ancestors did long ago, and then, at best, coming up with a diagram that can easily be looked up by anyone who needs it.

As to how many graduates of Harvard will need such a diagram, we can not say; it will be few. Sadler’s discovery that few of the graduates knew about the tilt of Earth’s axis does not trouble us a bit. What does trouble us, more than a bit, is that neither Sadler nor the graduates show any sign of having the ability to make and recognize sense.

We happen to know the *right* answer to Sadler’s question, which, it is most instructive to notice, does not depend on some information about the tilt of Earth’s axis, but only from having lived a little. It goes like this:

“Uh, listen, felleh, I don’t want to be rude, but I think you may be a little bit confused. It isn’t really the *earth* that gets hotter in what we call summer. It’s only a part of the earth, and when one part gets hotter, another part, for some reason or other, seems to get colder, like in Australia, you know, or down in South America somewhere where those really expensive raspberries come from. So maybe you ought to back off and get your head straight, and talk to someone who knows that astronomy stuff, before you go around making a pest and an ass of yourself on commencement day.”

If you had to choose, which would you rather be—someone who has never heard of the tilt of Earth’s axis, but who can make and recognize sense, or someone who can give the very value in degrees of Earth’s tilt, but who doesn’t know that he is tilted??

Fortunately, no one has to make that choice. But maybe, just maybe, it would be wise to make that choice anyway, and to decide which of those conditions might better be done without, and why.

Watson was astonished and dismayed to discover that Holmes was ignorant of the fact that Earth revolved around the sun. His “Egad!” was as loud as Sadler’s, or Hirsch’s, or any of the pious and self-serving lamentations of sectarian academics who want the taxpayers to spend more money on their pet interests, and who are always discovering new and exciting “illiteracies” to be cured by what they peddle.

Holmes was not at all abashed. He patiently explained to Watson, who was more susceptible to reason than our packs of projectors, that whether Earth went around the sun, or the sun around Earth, it would make “not a pennysworth of difference” to him and to his work. That is true. It is not merely “accurate” or “correct”; it is true.

Besides that weakness out of which they failed to consider the question, there is, to be sure, a certain deficit in those Harvard graduates, but it is not the one that Sadler thinks to have found. It is probably—this seems an epidemic condition nowadays—a distaste for reading what is not assigned, combined with the popular belief that there is no point in knowing anything that will not make a pennysworth of difference to their jobs. (They do not, like Holmes, know how to make any distinction between a person’s job and a person’s work.) They probably suppose that they have learned what they *needed* to learn, and have—rather prudently, in fact, according to their lights—refrained from wasting time and energy on what they didn’t need to learn. Thus it is that they have not picked up along the way those countless tidbits of information that most of us carry about all through life, and that do, although rarely, shed a spark of light into the work (not the job) of reflection.

(Do you know about the tilt of Earth’s axis? If not, how has your ignorance prevented you from doing the proper work of a person, from trying to understand? If you do—and most of our readers probably do, since they are of a certain kind of mind, and old enough to have been through what used to be called “General Science” in the ninth grade—what good has it done you? What goodness, that is to ask, has it brought you to?)

Science is not done with charts and cardboard tubes. Science is done by reflection, by *thinking* about what has been done with charts and cardboard tubes. Astronomy is not done by looking, but by considering, and not by being informed about the tilt of Earth.

When little children make themselves a “picture journal” of the time and place of the setting of the sun for three months, what will come of it? For a few moments every day, their parents will know what they are doing. The teachers will claim that their students have come to “understand” astronomy through “hands-on experiment,” and can now answer a few more questions on the trivial pursuit quizzes of cultural literacy. (Sadler does, in fact, call that sort of exercise an “experiment.”) And all the grantgrubbers of Academe will pronounce themselves armed with evidence toward the institution of the next round of courses intended to cure yet another hitherto undreamed of “illiteracy.”

And then consider what it would mean, and without regard to what is supposed to happen, should there be some little child who decides, all alone, to keep a log of the time and place of the setting of the sun, and to draw from it a *real* journal, with some writing in it, a record of the thoughtful reflection provoked by the results of observation. Now you can see the difference between the doing of science and something else.

And here *is* something else—a few words from Mark Petricone, another pilot of STAR: “I’m addressing things I’ve never addressed before: I’m making kids think about the way things work. It’s not a bunch of facts that make them feel like hotshots—like how many moons Saturn has or how far it is to the sun. It’s the underlying stuff.”

Very strange. Petricone say it’s not a bunch of facts, and Sadler goes around playing Gotcha! with a bunch of facts. And exactly what has Petricone been addressing up to now, that he has never before addressed the underlying stuff? Has he been wasting time with cardboard tubes and picture journals? And how does that cunning fellow make his students *think* about the way things work without ever falling into the trap of *telling* them how things work, thus precluding their thinking?

Toward the end of his life, Einstein wrote: “The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking.” Right. It

reminds us that if there is to be science, the thinking must be there first. It follows then that when we have mastered everyday thinking, so that we will carefully ask why, not Earth, but one of its hemispheres, gets hotter in what we call the summer, then, perhaps, we may go on to refine that carefulness into what might actually be called science. But, alas, not everybody can do that.

The Paradise of Bosses Raspberry-Resnick, II

As for the importance of school-taught generalized learning, Resnick doubts that most of us can be truly successful on the job without developing situation-specific forms of competence. For instance, “extensive training in electronics and trouble-shooting theories provides very little knowledge and fewer skills directly applicable to performing electronic trouble-shooting,” she says.

“Growing evidence of this kind points to the possibility that very little can be transported directly from school to out-of-school use. Both the structure of the knowledge and the social conditions of its use may be more fundamentally mismatched than we previously thought.”

THAT’S Raspberry again, being hypnotized by Resnick. He is feeling warm and relaxed all over. His eyelids are drooping. He is getting sleepy...very sleepy. He sleeps. He dreams.

He dreams of the Good Life, the Happy Land of fat, contented bosses, unto whom the State will provide, in never-ending succession, worker after worker, trained from kindergarten up in all those convenient little skills and notions that bosses need and love. He sees the benevolent government schools brimming with happy little pre-workers by the millions, learning not only all the tricky ins and outs of wiring and soldering, but also the even trickier tricks of going along and getting along. He sees, at last, the long-awaited end of selfishness, and disruptive individual enterprise, and the triumph of corporate thinking. He beholds with deep satisfaction the dissolution of “the presumed importance of generalized learning,” and the new dawn of the situation-specific in a brave new world where the troubleshooters shoot

every trouble, quick on the draw and all untroubled by troubleshooting theories. In his sleep he smiles. A happy man. Let us not wake him.

As best we can tell from Raspberry's commentary—and from another by Shanker, who may actually be Raspberry under another name, or *vice versa*—this Lauren Resnick is just a bit on the mealy-mouthed pussy-footing side of the Great Competing With The Japanese Educational Debate. What she wants to say is pretty clear, but she seems not to have the... uh, let's try "brass"—not to have the brass to say it.

Here are her principal assertions, as put by Raspberry: 1) school learning is inconsistent with what is required on the job, and 2) that this fact has "profound implications" for "educational reform." It takes no great mind to come up with 3) let's make the schools into training camps for the production of useful servitors of the great cause of commerce and industry. Simple.

Now Lauren Resnick is some sort of an educationist, one of those people who are better described as holding a position than as having a job. We know many such, and all of us know many such, for of many such is the great American bureaucracy of "service" constructed. And, for some strange reason, it is always from position-holding servicers like the Lauren Resnicks that we hear the cry for a skillful and cooperative work-force that will allow us to compete with the Japanese. Our electrician does not give a damn about competing with the Japanese; and our plumber once *did* compete with the Japanese, and rather successfully, too, but that was almost half a century ago, and now he has enough of his own work to do not to care what the Japanese do. All in the face of the terrible pressure of the decline of America into a second-class power, these men, and other men and women beyond counting, have found peace. They just do their jobs.

Well, we are compassionate. Even about Resnicks and Raspberrys, we do worry. They seem so unhappy; they whine a lot. Their nails, we fear, may be bitten to the quick, as they contemplate the dreary future of American commerce and industry, and dread the day when they may have to buy a Datsun. So we'd like to do something for all such folk, and we can. We can give them some good advice.

So, you want to compete with the Japanese? Hey, that's OK, it's a free country. Just go out and do it! Get out of that office and get a little air. After all, what kind of life is that, sitting around scribbling lamentations, talking on the phone, going to conferences *about* how to compete with the Japanese, reading each other's stuff, scrounging up a grant or an invitation to some hearing now and then. Come on! That's no life for a competitor like you. Get out and get work! Build a house or two. Dig some coal. Polish up a few ball bearings, or bolt a good old American fender onto a good old American Chevy. Fix something that was broken. Cut some lawns, or shovel some snow, grow some vegetables, but best of all, make something. Anything. Any physical object that some human being would be willing to pay for. For what you're doing now, you know, no individual human person on the face of the earth would pay a nickel; only institutions buy that sort of thing. So go out and earn a little honest money, and make the sort of stuff that used to be called "goods." You'll feel better, a bit of that good old self-esteem, you know. And you know what else? You'll really be doing it, the thing your heart desires. You'll really be competing with those pesky Japanese. And we'll be real proud of you. Even in the pages of THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN you will be named with honor and praise, as people who said what they meant and meant what they said, and who took their own advice and minded their own business. There is no greater tribute.

Remember also the wise words of C. Wright Mills, a thinker not unacquainted with work and working:

"When white-collar people get jobs, they sell not only their time and energy, but their personalities as well. They sell by the week, or month, their smiles and their kindly gestures, and they must practice that prompt repression of resentment and aggression."

Now ask yourself this: Can it be that there are some children out there in the schools who may someday decide, as they grow in the power of reflection, that they do not *want* to compete with the Japanese? That they want only to live a sane and quiet life, finding—and minding—their own business, doing whatever useful and productive work to which their skills and temperaments seem suited? Are there some who, when they come to

discover some truths, will prefer *not* to sell their personalities, but to retain them as private property to be nurtured in thoughtful stewardship? Will some learn that what seems a sad necessity is not a necessity at all, but only a conventional device of competitiveness, and thus discover that they do not *have* to sell their smiles and kindly gestures?

But the Position Holders of Servicing will not listen. They have it made in the Paradise of Bosses. They are full of plans for other people, and hot in the pursuit of the meaning and purpose of somebody else's life. When they "reform" what they call "education," they lick some boss's boot by prescribing for the young what they would not want for themselves, or for their *own* children—exactly that training that will bring a life of limited choices, and exactly that indoctrination that will stunt the growth of the power of reflection.

"School learning," writes Resnick, "lays stress on individual cognition, while learning in virtually every context (?) tends [famous weasel-word] to be a cooperative enterprise." Uh huh.

I tell you, sir, the only safeguard of order
and discipline in the modern world
is a standardized worker
with interchangeable parts.
That would solve
the entire problem of management.
GIRADOUX, *La folle de Chaillot*

Brief Notes

The Happy Few who are old enough to have been around in the great days of the American comic strip will have recognized, with a pang of loss, the illustration that appears on page 2 of this issue. Some may even have seen, all in a flash of sweet remembrance, the entire episode, in which the rascal Ignatz Mouse gives Crazy Kat a hands-on lesson in astronomy, only to be hauled off to jail by Offissa Pup, one of America's first true critics of educationism.

We print it, well, as an act of piracy, of course, but also in loving memory of George Herriman, the Faulkner of Coconino County. Sleep well, sweet Kat.

We greet, however belatedly, another godchild: the *Individualist Journal*, which is entirely the work of one of our readers, George Steele, of Seattle. Although we have just seen our first example, it is already well into volume two, which is a good sign. The first year is hard to survive.

We do believe that this land should be littered with individualist journals, ongoing excursions into understanding conducted by single minds and displayed in public for the consideration of other single minds. Let them sink or swim, but let them be. We suspect that George Steele would send you a sample copy, if you were to write to him at Post Office Box 33486, Seattle, Washington 98133. Try it.

We know many skills and tricks that will help people who want to publish their own individualist journals. Our consulting service, which is prohibitively expensive even for the wealthiest non-personal entities, is absolutely free to all of our persons. Please do not hesitate to ask us for a little help.

The Underground Grammarian Tractarian Society now has eleven titles in print. Of these, four are Great Booklets, our tiny compendia of good, if sometimes painful, little readings from all sorts of minds, passages or paragraphs that provoke what we call real reading, the irresistible need to look up from the page and wonder. We are now trying to put together a Fifth Great Booklet, and we need your help.

Keep on reading. Read everything and anything. Whenever you find that you simply must stop and think, or even stop and fume, you have probably found exactly what we are looking for. Copy it and send it in.

*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 Twelve, Number Eight . . . December 1988



The Mixed Nuts Formula

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

Walter Savage Landor

WITH this issue, we come to the end of our twelfth year of publication. If this were an enterprise dedicated to the reform of what is called “education” in America, we would be glum. But it is not, and we are delighted. And expectant.

If we could do anything about our system of schooling, we would undertake its destruction rather than its reform. We know already, and have regularly chronicled, the lunatic fandangos of reform in the schools, and we know also that their reforms will always be more of the same, for all that they do arises, and must arise, from the ideas and principles embedded in the heart of the enterprise. And those ideas and principles are silly, just plain silly. But not cute, for they do generate a strange and modern form of tyranny, a tyranny whose ruler is a spooky nonentity who can neither take nor give thought, being nothing less than the averaged, collective will of a big pack of silly people.

The current disorders in American education, which are even worse than they were twelve years ago, should be seen not as Bad Things, but as Good Things. Those grinding, screeching noises that you hear promise the fall of the fantastic palace of twentieth century educationism. Its timbers were never sound, its corners never true. Earth, whose every part is sound, has no place for it. Be patient.

Some of you will remember the sort of piece we did often in years gone by—a scrutiny of some portion of that sentimental nonsense that passes for the teaching of teachers to teach. It was

shooting fish in a barrel, of course, but it did explain why it is that school teachers often seem the least intellectual class of folk in America. Since then, there has been “reform” after “reform” in the teacher academies. We have some results to report.

In North Carolina, they give tests to incipient school teachers, one on what they call “general knowledge,” which prudently omits all questions of specific knowledge, like the axioms of geometry and the prepositions that take the dative, and the other on “communication skills,” whatever those might be. The tests, which are less than rigorous, are cooked up, by consensus and compromise, at the Educational Testing Service. The questions seem intended for little children.

If your mixed nuts consist of peanuts and cashews in a ratio of four to seven, how many pounds of cashews do you have if you have 28 pounds of peanuts? Which appeared most recently: humans, the atmosphere, the seas, the fossils, or the reptiles?

Not surprisingly, there are, even in the schools, people who think that these tests might be made a little more demanding, or, at least that slightly higher scores might be required of those who are deemed to “pass.” In fact, the University of North Carolina Board of Governors would like to see the passing level set way, way up—at the thirty-fifth percentile!

Wow. Now, we promise you this. You are one of our readers, yes? Good. Whatever you do in this life, whatever you think of your own “education,” if you will go and take that “test” for incipient school teachers, you will end up well above the ninetieth percentile, which means, with a higher score than at least nine tenths of all who take the test. On a bad day, and with both hands tied behind your back.

And now you know what to think when we tell you that the “passing” grade currently in force in North Carolina is the second percentile. That’s right. If you want to be a mentor of young minds in North Carolina, you have to do better than two percent of the other people who take the test.

Now here’s a test you may fail. How do you react to that trinket of news. Are you appalled? Wrong. Are you steaming with righteous indignation? Wrong again. Are you rolling on the floor, choking with laughter? Right!

That's funny. That is a story about a bunch of very silly people doing very silly things, and taking themselves very seriously the while. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the sillies will do irremediable harm to a bunch of innocent children. The harm, if it can be done, has already been done by all those silly parents who were taught by the last lot of silly teachers. And children are not all that innocent; lots of them are well aware of the pretty obvious fact that most of their teachers are ignoramuses or fools, or both. Those who aren't may well become teachers, and it won't matter.

Here's another question from that formidable teacher test:

Which of the following words, used to describe another culture or country, would be most likely to be used by an ethnocentric speaker? Religious, agricultural, uncivilized, assertive, or developing.

That's one of those trick questions, an ideological litmus test disguised as a vocabulary question. The "right" answer is really a rite answer, a ritual. When you take the test, you may well have to leave this one unanswered; it requires information you don't have. Given an "ethnocentric speaker," you still have to know what he's talking about in order to say which word he is "more likely" to use. How assertive got into that list is a mystery—probably a desperate shot at one more word so that there could be five choices, but the rite answer, of course, is "uncivilized." School teachers are expected to believe, without ever having pondered and tested the ideas of civitas and civility, that everybody everywhere is always civilized, and that only a bigot would say otherwise; but if you have even the faintest suspicion that Locke was right in saying that we should use no word that we have not thoroughly thought out and agreed upon, you might want a few years of study and pondering before answering that question.

And you might, in your pondering, consider some hypothetical country or culture in which the mixed nuts of educationism have decided that the nurture of the minds of the young should be given into the care only of those who have managed to score above the second percentile in a remarkably simple test, and ask yourself whether it would be shamefully ethnocentric of you to call that country or culture uncivilized. How about "assertive"?

Fear not. North Carolina will not go to the thirty-fifth percentile. It would not be silly enough. Whatever they do will be funnier than that. All we have to do is keep laughing. For the health of the tree of liberty, the humiliation of tyrants is just as good as their blood.

The Chelsea Proviso

(This passage is intimidating, long, and dull, but read it anyway. Aloud.)

In entering into this agreement, the parties recognize that both the success of the project and their ability to achieve the objectives of this agreement depend on factors external to and beyond the capacity of the University and the School Committee and require the support, cooperation, and active involvement of the people of the City of Chelsea, the public employees and officials of the City—both within and outside the Chelsea school system, the elected leadership of the City and all branches of government of the City—and the support of public and private agencies and branches of government beyond Chelsea, including the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Federal Government, as well as business and industry. The parties recognize as well the special role that parents will play in achieving the success of the project and will actively seek their involvement and cooperation throughout. In addition to the cooperation of these diverse groups, financial and other support from the Commonwealth and Federal Government will be necessary to carry out the proposed project. In the absence of such support, the project cannot succeed in revitalizing the quality of education in the Chelsea schools.

BAD, of course, very bad. Nevertheless, if you happen to have any children trapped in the Industrial Ideological Complex of American Public Schooling, you ought to read it again. And once more. The pain will be good for you.

It is a passage from a contract between the operators of the schools in Chelsea MA, and some other operators at Boston University, especially Long John Silber, himself, the crusty and not

entirely unlikable president of BU, who is always in some sort of trouble that does him credit. Those are some lawyer's words, of course, not Long John's, but his inevitable subscription to them leads us to suspect that he is undertaking, as Edith Wharton said of Henry James, to chew a good deal more than he can bite off.

Silber has put it to the demoralized school operators of Chelsea that they should hand over all that work to BU, which will promise, in return, to shape up the schools, raise the scores, lower the dropout and impregnation rates, and all the rest of that stuff. So far, the best result of Silber's offer is that it has driven Al Shanker frantic with worry about the fate of teachers who might some day find themselves both accountable and de-unionized. And it was Shanker who nosed out the prose quoted above, using it to suggest that there are hopeless tangles of string attached to Silber's promises. Shanker, of course, has often used those tangles as excuses for the failure of the bold, innovative thrusts that he likes, but he hates to think that someone else might get off the hook with the same dodge.

We would like to say—so that we could seem polite and judicious—that it will be interesting to watch the unfolding of events in Chelsea, and that we will keep you informed. But it won't, and we won't. It will be, and the parties to that quibbling contract obviously know it, the same damn mess all over again. We expect never to say anything more about it, except, maybe, "Ha!" someday. Forget it.

Think, instead, of this: Imagine that you have, tomorrow, one of those nasty flashes of self-knowledge, and notice that you are a spiteful and devious conniver who blames his own failings on the ill will of others, and who then devotes the greater part of his energies to the taking of revenge. Very bad news, as self-knowledge often is. Imagine further, however, that you decide to do something about yourself, that you actually say, I must change. Such things do happen.

Now what do you do? Of what, exactly, is it that you stand in need, and where is it to be found? What will you do if it turns out that the betterment you seek can be provided only by others, and that the others work in a vast government betterment industry, and that that industry can promise good results only if it can be sure of the support,

cooperation, and active involvement of just about every human being and every inhuman agency in the whole land, and that, lacking support, cooperation, and active involvement, to say nothing of the money that goes along with all that, no promises can be made, and that you may very well have to spend the rest of your life as the contemptible swine you are today?

You have just discovered why a massive system of government schooling does not cause education, has never caused education, and never will.

We can define education in many ways, and we should; it is not a thing in the world, but the devising of our minds, whose attributes we may choose, and whose consequences and effects will vary according to the wisdom of our choices. If we choose to say that an education is whatever helps us to compete with the Japanese, then we will have one sort of world. If we choose to call education those powers which bring self-knowledge and self-government, then we will have another sort of world. If, like the government schoolers, we choose not to pin ourselves down, and especially not to risk anybody's disapproval, but rather to hint that all things from freeform macramé bulletin boards to condom drill must be *some sort* of education, then we will have this world, the world in which we can't even be sure of having *that* sort of nonsense, never mind a little spelling and ciphering, without the support, cooperation, and active involvement of...

The important thing to notice about that colossal disclaimer in the Chelsea-Silber contract is that what it says is true. Even the paltry "education" of the schoolers is just not possible without all of that support, *etc., etc.* Now a civilized nation would take one look at that fact, and say, Well, if that is the case, we will have to wait a mighty long time, and bend arms beyond counting, and turn ourselves utterly into wheedlers and flatterers in order to make these silly damn schools work. Better to trash the whole mess and start over. Better, in fact, to do nothing at all than more of this.

But we are not a civilized nation; we are the land that the last century or so of schooling has made. Like unreconstructed Ptolemaic astronomers, we just have to go on adding new epicycles to the epicycles we have already added to the cycles. To you, that may seem a

dismal prospect, but to the Ptolemaic astronomers it's paydirt.

Now suppose that someone were to tell you, in your miserable condition, that not all the king's horses and all the king's men can do a thing to help you, but that there is one, and only one, person who can? You wouldn't be at all surprised, would you? So we won't surprise you when we say, as we will say, that Long John Silber, all by himself, or you, or even Al Shanker, or anyone at all, can bring one person into that sort of education which is the cultivation of self-knowledge and self-government. And maybe, with a little bit of luck, a few others.

Without that sort of education, all the rest is nothing more than a convenience that will serve just as well for annihilating the Japanese as for competing with them. Technical skills and social adjustment bring no betterment in those who know no "better."

They wouldn't do it gladly, but even educationists would have to concede that there can be no justification for any kind of schooling whatsoever unless it is intended to bring about some betterment in those who suffer it. So this is the essential question, the very heart of the enterprise that we call education: Is there anything that I can do to lead this person, not into some better life, but into that condition out of which he may make a better life? It is the question that any sane and decent parent must ask daily. Indeed, since we are all to each other the only help we have, it is the question every sane and decent person must ask daily.

So what shall we say of one who says: Well, sure I'm the one for the job, but, of course, I can't be expected to bring it off without perfect and unstinting cooperation from all the king's horses and all the king's men, and from you, too. And lots of money.

Well, naturally, we will conclude that he is a real *professional* of education.

Bokes For to Rede

A Reader's Delight

by Noel Perrin

University Press of New England, 1988

THE English word "read" really is an English word, and a very old one. Its older meaning is what makes memorable the name of an otherwise

undistinguished king of old England, one Ethelred the Unready, hero and patron saint of schoolboys going to tests. Ethelred was so called because he was disinclined to read, which is to say, to take counsel, to consider, to ponder. He came, of course, to a bad end.

In old England, being able to read had nothing to do with what we call "literacy," which might be better understood as the trivial thing we can't always manage to teach in school—the ability to make out the letters. It is a shame that we have lost this distinction, for it would help us both in schools and in the world to notice that many who can make out the letters can not read, and that there must be some who can read but cannot make out the letters.

We often wish that Socrates had learned English. Then he might have had a better opinion of reading, and in that unsettling passage about Thoth's invention of writing he might have had more to think about. When he speaks of the majestic silence of books, which neither can nor will answer our questions or even defend themselves, he is thinking of course of "books" as he knew them, which were indeed but one voice in an enquiry that really required two.

Socrates probably didn't think of the poems of Homer as "books," in our sense of the word, and, except for them he probably knew nothing at all that would lead him to admiration and assent when one might say, "There is no frigate like a book." On the contrary, he would probably put most of our favorite books in a class with the inspired, but dangerous, melodies of the poets, who are to be greeted warmly and banqueted just outside the city gates, and then sent on their ways, garlanded, but gone. Is there not in Socrates, and in those old Greeks in general, a strange distrust of delight?

We would like to hear what Noel Perrin has to say about all that. Noel Perrin is ready. *A Reader's Delight* is surely the most delightful book of the year. It is a book of many (but not enough) little essays on books. It could have been called *Books I Have Known and Loved*, a title under which we all have lists, of course. But Perrin's list is longer and better. And readier.

Each essay is a little treasure in itself, and also, for most readers, a map of buried treasure. You want to read a good book, a book you've never read before, or even heard of? Perrin will point

you to it. Is there some wonder hidden in your past but now truly out of mind? Perrin has probably read it, and loved it. Do you think, to this day, that such and such was probably one of the best of its time, and that no one seems to have noticed it? Perrin did. Is there some quirky, darling love of your own, so far from the high road, and so out of fashion in these times, that you never mention it, never reveal how deeply once you loved such stuff? You have a friend who will show you why you were right all along, and send you on a search for a good bookseller.

(Our associate circulation manager, in his crassest twenties, discovered socialist realism, and was thus led to abandon a complete, painfully assembled set of the works of James Branch Cabell—the Silver Stallion Edition. Now, brought to his senses by Perrin, he wanders the crypts and passage-ways of THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN megacomplex, crying out most pitifully after his lost books. It's a sad case. Should these books have come into your possession—such things happen—please return them straightway.)

We have, as regular readers know, our own definition of “reading.” We think it useful and beneficial to make some important distinction between what happens in the person who receives what is drawn on the door of the public toilet and takes meaning from it, and what happens in the person who looks up from the page and ponders. It is the reading that sends us to take counsel, and that makes us, in the best old sense of the word, ready.

It is also the reading that might be called permanent, or at least lifelong. It is the reading that we do again and again, in the still watches of the night and in the bustle of the day, and all in the absence of the book. It is reading analogous to nourishment. We are, in part, what we eat, but we are also what we read. What we read can just as surely make us shallow and stupid as what we eat can make us flabby and short of wind. And, as we can die for the lack of this or that mere mineral, so too what can die in a worse way for the lack of this or that nourishment of another kind.

(Along these lines, it would be possible, and entertaining, to make a case for the indictment of our school folk as killers of children, who are certainly in a condition that might be called

malnutrition verging on starvation, but we must leave that to you.)

When you read Noel Perrin, you will see that he is a man in excellent health, quicker and stronger than Arnold Schwarzeneger. And readier. He must be eating what the big boys eat.



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