

# The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Thirteen, Number One . . . . February 1989

## Go Sell the Spartans

SOMEWHERE among those clippings that we must have lost in the last month, there was a story about an educationist in California who was reciting the currently popular pledge of allegiance to Values. He said, more or less, that he saw nothing wrong with letting students know about Horatio at the bridge, and that the poem would show them a good example of someone who saw how important it was to defend democratic values.

Now, to get Horatio mixed up with Horatius is no big deal. But to ascribe to Horatius a devotion to democratic values is a big mistake. He himself, if we remember correctly, asked, How can man die better than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his gods? While George Bush, ditched in the cold Pacific, may in fact have been revering the separation of church and state, Horatius was surely not taking up the defense of an independent judiciary and a system of checks and balances when he asked who would stand at his right hand.

In another time, schoolchildren beyond counting knew about Horatius. They admired him. They were stirred by his deed, in which they saw, whether they could name it or not, something both important and good. And they saw the same in Leonidas, and in Roland, and in Davy Crockett too.

What they saw, and loved, was not some political conviction, not party membership, but courage—courage keeping the bridge with the constant companions of courage, strength and self-discipline. They did not see “values,” or the “defense of values.” They saw virtue. They knew it was good.

That Californian educationist tells us all we really need to know about the future of all this values business in the schools. He is afraid to say the name of virtue. He has to demote courage into “the defense of democratic values.” It is as though

courage by itself were not enough, and that it stands in need of official certification. After all, although we may, grudgingly, have to concede that some Bad Guys seemed to show courage in the defense of values other than democratic, we can hardly call them virtuous, or take the chance that schoolchildren might admire them.

After much hassling about the fake question of “whose values to teach,” our educationists have decided to play it safe yet again and stick to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which neither praise the courageous nor despise the cowardly. Those documents do not, as they should not, address themselves to the virtue of the individual. They elaborate the limitations of government, which has not what it takes to be either cowardly or brave, and they leave the individual free to be either. They set forth not the lineaments of virtue and vice, of which only the will of a person is capable, but of legitimacy and illegitimacy, the cloudy and ephemeral analogues of “good” and “bad” in politics.

It is exactly out of cowardice that the school people have retreated into the shelter of this perfectly splendid but utterly inappropriate body of lore. They are afraid of religionists. They are afraid of immigrants, who seem, to them, to have come to this land in order to preserve the very customs and conventions from which they barely escaped with their lives. They are afraid of minorities, now beyond counting, whom they seem to suspect of harboring weird “alternative values,” an admiration of sloth, perhaps, or a reverence for deceit. So they are playing it safe with the sturdy shield of official certification.

The religionists, any brave teacher would disregard utterly. We are deluded, and ignorant of history, if we accept the proposition that religious belief is the root of our search for the moral life. And we are viciously deluded if we think it, as the religionists would prefer, the only root of the moral life, so that we can then throw hand grenades into each other’s baby carriages in good conscience.

And, in the search for the moral life, there are no immigrants. There are no minorities. They are all human people. They have various customs and conventions, even as every family does, and they have different “values,” no doubt, some thinking time or money better spent in this way or that, but they do not have different virtues. No culture

inculcates the admiration of treachery, or contempt for fidelity. White, black, and brown children, and all shades in between, will recognize and admire virtue when they see it, not only in members of other cultures, but even in bunny rabbits in story books. In this regard, the only true minority is the company—is it really growing?—of the depraved. To them there is no speaking.

Most school children are probably not depraved. That takes time. And they are not cowards. They can accept the fact that Horatius' courage is a goodness in itself, and that it does not require the license of official ideology. They really deserve brave teachers, but the educationists are not in any position to provide them with brave teachers. ("People with courage and character," said Hesse, "always seem sinister to the rest.")

The educationists are not really depraved. Not yet. But they are in danger of depravity; they have learned to reinterpret their cowardice not merely as an enforced concession to their status as public servants, politically hostage to the multitude, but as an ideologically correct "fairness." They will say, for instance, that they cannot just ignore the religionists, or even let one of the teachers ignore the religionists; they are, after all, in the service of the whole public, the nation. Compromise. Conciliation. And they are what they call "realistic" in the face of fearful odds, and not about to fight to hold some little bridge. They need the money. "Those in back cry, Forward; and those in front cry, Back!"

Too bad. It is actually quite easy to show children goodness and lead them into thinking about it. Movies do it all the time, far better than the schools. It can be done in any subject matter, but it probably is easiest in such studies as literature and history. All it takes is a brave, and free, teacher. We imagine a history lesson for little children:

A brave teacher would have to say something like this: Well, I would not like to live in a place like Sparta, and I think its form of government not conducive to the fullest and best possible development of every citizen, but I cannot deny that Leonidas shines, and all his men. There is some mystery here. For that stern and ferocious city, good and brave men chose to die. See what is written on the stone: Go, stranger. Go tell the Spartans, that here, obedient to her laws, we chose to die. What a strange thing virtue is, and what a

wondrous thing a person is. And what a strange thing war is, too, most hideous of all human enterprises. A mad monster, in whose service, however, a man need not go mad.

A cowardly teacher will lie, and peddle some bull about the defense of all our swell rights to something or other.

## Crying for the Moon

"We made a commitment to go to the moon.

Can't we make a commitment that no person will drop out of school and that all people will be able to read?"

THAT inanity comes forth from the mouth, and probably, alas, from the mind, of one Lauro Cavazos. Cavazos is just now the federal government's tame educationist, a replacement part newly stuck into the socket left empty by the departure of William Bennett, who will now take care of the drug war.

Bennett was not popular with the educationists. Cavazos is popular with the educationists. Unlike Bennett, Cavazos is full of Right Sentiments. The sentiment pronounced above is so right that it wins the following approval of Fred Hechinger, who keeps on explaining all about education for the *New York Times*:

"Perhaps the shift from Mr. Bennett's often shrill rhetoric to Mr. Cavazos's compassionate appeal for the poor is the first sign of a turn to the kinder, gentler nation."

Among educationists, "shrill rhetoric" means anything that is not mush from a wimp. And they love especially any mush that can somehow or other be construed as a compassionate appeal for the poor. As far as we know, they have not yet been tested as to where they stand on some imaginable appeal to the poor, which might actually have some effect on such social mysteries as widespread illiteracy and escape from school, but that day will never come until educationists like Cavazos start to show some signs of education, and thus develop the habit of listening to themselves and trying to speak sense instead of sentiment.

We have not looked it up, but we are pretty damned sure that this Cavazos fellow had no part whatsoever in the complicated enterprise of sending some men to hit golf balls around on the

moon. Nor do we believe that Lauro Cavazos ever put his hand on his heart or his Bible or whatever and “made the commitment” to go to the moon. And the same goes for his pals.

Students in school have a name for that kind of talk, but our stylesheet does not permit us to use it. We are, however, permitted to point out that it is as arrogant and presumptuous as it is fatuous. Who the hell is *he* to say “we,” when he, just like our associate circulation manager, had no more part in “going to the moon” than he had in getting through the winter at Valley Forge or crossing the Rubicon? What is it with these ridiculous education people, that they claim professional powers of deep understanding of the Big Issues, to say nothing of compassion, but they can’t even keep track of the antecedents of their pronouns?

They are also notoriously bad with analogies. Does that Cavazos truly imagine that universal literacy along with the universal preventive detention of children are to be brought about in the same way that people can make the machinery for a trip to the moon? That is not a “mistake.” It is a profound misunderstanding. And it may well be *the* profound misunderstanding which brings all sentimental do-goodism ultimately to exacerbate the supposed “problems” that it seeks to solve.

In fact, the trip to the moon is not a wonder or a marvel. Since no law of nature forbade it, and information and technology are cumulative, it was inevitable. Inescapable. It is no greater an accomplishment for “us” than another stunt was for them who bridged the Hellespont. The truly wondrous achievement would be not the devising of some elaborate machinery with which to do something never done before, but the decision not to use it. Of this, since thoughtfulness and understanding are *not* cumulative, we are incapable.

Of the supposed “commitment” of any individual technician who worked on the moon business, no other of us can speak, or should. It is, in any case, not relevant. It is perfectly possible, even likely, that some greedy and self-serving electrical engineer, with no other motive than personal gain, did excellent and essential work. Nor did he, or any of his colleagues, need to win the approval and consent of their materials or systems. Or of the moon. They needed only that steel be steel; gravity, gravity; and logic, logic.

Cavazos’ fruitcake fantasy in which “no person will drop out of school” is about exactly that—no person. But the will out of which to stay in school—or to drop out of it, for that matter—is to be found only in *a* person. Does this Cavazos imagine that the wills of countless children can somehow be sent to some moon because steel is steel? Or does he perhaps know that the two enterprises are utterly unlike, and imagine only that some Right Sentiment in the educationists will magically bring about an alteration of the will in countless children? No, to both, we suspect. What he does know, however, is that if he says those silly words, people like Fred Hechinger will pronounce him virtuous.

Compassion is a marvelously comfortable virtue. You can have as much of it as you like without ever being inconvenienced just so long as you are careful to have compassion for so many people that you can’t possibly find the time to deal with any mere individual among them. Compassion for your neighbor who has lost his job, and whose children and dogs play with your children and dogs, can put you in an awkward spot from time to time. Compassion for an elderly father who has gone dotty and cranky can cost you half your life. But the Big Compassion, compassion for the vast multitudes of the poor, or the hungry who live in some distant land, will cost you nothing but an occasional five-spot by mail to some compassion jobber, and will furthermore provide you with a bumper sticker that will identify you to the world as virtuous. Your neighbor cannot afford to pass out bumper stickers, and your compassion for him might well be wasted.

Hechinger finds further proof of the Compassion of Cavazos in the fact that Cavazos has promised to “be consistent in seeking funding” for Chapter One, which seems to be some sort of federal program. How splendidly different this is, says Hechinger, from “the conservative incantation that ‘you can’t solve problems by throwing money at them’.” Apparently there is some equivalent liberal incantation that you *can* solve problems by throwing money at them.

Bad cess to both those packs of superstitious incanters. In fact, you can solve any problem. That’s what “problem” means. A problem is one

end of a tangled string. The other end exists. You have to figure out how to pull.

Going to the moon is a problem. It requires logical analysis based on certain facts and permanent principles, all of which can be known, even if they aren't when you begin. Every element of it is "dependable," in the sense that arithmetical operations are dependable, so that three from seven is always four. It calls for ordering and harmonizing, for scrupulous attention to the tiniest details of every little thing, and for a vision of the whole of which all the details are essential parts. It is a big problem, but it is just a problem. It can be solved.

But the "dropout problem" is not a problem. It is something else. There is not one piece of string; there are millions. No generalizations can be assumed; no dependable operations exist. It has no axioms, no list of the attributes and behaviors of materials. Not all the time and money in the world will "solve" it, because *solving* is not the action relevant to it. There is no other end of the string to reach. To "believe" in the other end is just that, a belief, a pious dream. Religiousness. Right Sentiment. Bunk.

On the other hand, to go out into the streets and find some kid who won't go to school and who is royally screwing up his whole life, and, in the place of his miserable parents who have already screwed up beyond remedy, to do something for him, so that he might be willing to go through all of the silly rituals of schooling and still come out better, and in some hope of happiness—that you can do.

Cavazos can't. He's too busy solving the dropout problem.

### **Shrill Rhetoric from the Wimp**

WE had a letter from a good and faithful reader. It was both interesting and disturbing. She said that while she enjoyed reading *THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN*, she also observed that its essays were "mostly negative in tone." In other words, we guess, interesting and disturbing.

But she said more than that, and we think she deserves some answers to all of this:

"Could you offer some positive, concrete suggestions for improving our educational system? It is very well to sit back and say that we

must teach children 'the cultivation of self-knowledge and self government,' but how? Surely they must also learn reading, writing and arithmetic. In the day to day classroom, with all of its distractions and subversions, how does a teacher impart the cultivation of self-knowledge? ... How does society teach people to *be*?"

Her letter's excellent questions, and her profound understanding that education is a matter not of what a person can do, but of what a person can *be*, have some ironic implications for us.

We too are uneasy about that negative tone. Surely, wisdom and complaint cannot dwell together any more than wisdom and charity can dwell apart. And we are not charitable. We do the best we can to prove the case when we call fools fools, but we do call them fools. In public—although to be sure, in a very small public.

To our knowledge, no educationist has ever lost a job, or even suffered mild disapproval from his colleagues or masters, for having been ridiculed in this sheet. We will, however, be first to say that that does not matter, that he who fires off the bullet will not escape guilt, however he may escape the laws, just because he happens to miss. Nor can we deny that, even in the certainty that we can do them no harm, that it is not for the good of our victims that we talk about them.

As it happens, however, our associate circulation manager did once write, on our behalf, a book that was, with only a few minor lapses, kind. Of those who had reviewed some of his earlier books, few wanted to touch this one. Those few, almost without exception, said that they liked him much better when he was snarky, and funny. The book was called *The Gift of Fire*, and—how strange—it tries to provide some answers to exactly the questions asked by the reader quoted above. And to many other, related questions and vexations.

It said, in brief: Look. There is no point in carping forever about the system. Let us consider what we might usefully and intelligently choose to mean by true education, and discover some way in which we might bring some measure of it about, in ourselves, and then, but *only* then, in others.

It is not a book on the reform of the schools, however. It holds education a purely inward condition that might or might not be engendered in schools, or anywhere else, and that might or might not be precluded by schools, or by anything

else. It did not, however, make any suggestions as to how “society” might teach people to be. It argued rather that our belief that “society” can teach—or learn—will insure us forever against education. It provided no support at all for conservative ideas about education, or for liberal ideas about education. William Bennett and Albert Shanker, had they read it, would have equally disapproved it.

To us, of course, that seems an old story. We would rather live in a shell-hole in no man’s land than enlist in either of the ignorant armies, but we may be fooling ourselves. Some good people that we know have said, with surprising frequency, that they tried to read *Gift of Fire*, but that it kept them awake at night, and that they had to give it up. Other have said, Yes, yes, that’s the truth, and then never mentioned it again. Some few have been inordinate in their praise, but they could be cranks. And it may simply be that the book is just plain wrong, or silly, or no good. We really don’t know, and it is certainly not for us to judge. It is, however, exactly what our correspondent is asking for, and we have to urge that she read it. She may, of course, disapprove what she finds, but beyond the answering we cannot go. In any case, since she is one of us, she will understand that an answer, or any sort of consideration, that is intended to win somebody’s approval, is clearly far worse than no answer at all. We do what we can. She can have it.

We have, inevitably, been slipping ideas from *Gift of Fire* into these pieces. Perhaps we should do more of that. But Shaw once said, “If you do not say a thing in an irritating way, you may just as well not say it at all, because people will not trouble themselves about anything that does not trouble them.” Nobody goes looking for light until he notices that it is getting dark.

Readers often write to say that they have tried to find a book of our ACM, but that it is either out of print or in a mysterious condition called “unavailable.” What they have is a lazy bookseller. All of the ACM’s books are in print, either from Little, Brown, or Simon and Schuster. And they are all available, too, to any bookseller who will trouble himself to order them.

Send off a note and have yourself added to the mailing list of *The Common Reader*, a recurrent

catalog published by a good bookseller named Alex Goulder, who can be found at 175 Tompkins Avenue, Pleasantville, NY 10570. He has good books.

*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, i.e., libraries, \$25, or more.



# The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Thirteen, Number Two . . . . March 1989



## The Great Divide

A subcommittee of the National Commission on Education briefly considered this subject of moral education. The members mused about the possibility of employing the Tao of C. S. Lewis (in *The Abolition of Man*) as a starting point for this discussion. The Tao is a list of convictions held by all of the major religions and religious philosophies. It includes respect for ancestors or elders, honesty in one’s dealings with others, principles of mercy and justice, and other great ethical insights. The committee did not continue to meet because of the press of time and preoccupation with academic aspects of schooling.

THOSE are the words of Annette Kirk, which we found in *The University Bookman*, Volume 28, Number 4. (A good sheet, by the way.) Kirk was one of the members of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. It was that commission that sent out the famous “Nation at Risk” report, which held that no imaginable enemy of the nation could have done us more

damage than what had been done to us by our own schools.

We were not astonished. We had already been saying that for years, and without charging the taxpayers a cent. We were also not astonished, but only a little bit saddened, that there was no rioting in the streets, and that not one dean of teacher-training was burned in effigy. After all, it makes just as much sense to ride the curriculum coordinators out of town on a rail as to trash a Datsun in Detroit, or to dump tea into the harbor, for that matter, but some things count more than others.

Since “Nation at Risk,” of course, everything has gone downhill. And the most recent discovery of damage done by the enemy within is what Kirk has in mind in her after-the-fact reflections on the Commission’s work. She is, in effect, answering a currently popular question: Well, how come you excellence people didn’t do something about all this moral rot and decay, and see to it that the schools teach some neat values, for a change? And Kirk’s answer is, not unreasonably, Look, we couldn’t do *everything*, and we did have to deal with the academic stuff.

Although the academic stuff turns out not to have been dealt with any better than the values stuff, we can hardly blame Kirk, or the Commission, for that. But, considering the interesting clue they found (but ignored) in that business of the Tao, we are inclined to blame them for having missed perhaps the only federally sponsored opportunity of this age to contemplate the assumption implicit in Kirk’s exculpation—the assumption that the intellectual life is one thing, and the moral life another.

Most people do *believe* that; but they don’t *know* that. Nobody knows that. It is professable and professed, of course, notably by the “professionals” of mind and the “professionals” of soul, for the two tribes long ago made a mutual security pact, each agreeing to leave the other free to recruit whatever believers it could. There have been truce violations, to be sure, but only over the question of who is ruling in what province. Never does one tribe assert its right to do the work of the other. Only in very select company will one tribe debunk the work of the other. And the rest of us are left to believe that if we want knowledge, there is only one tribe to consult, and, if goodness, only the other. It is a handy arrangement.

In this context, C. S. Lewis, on whose book the members mused, is an interesting case. While he speaks always out of some doctrinal orthodoxy, he argues always out of reason, where there is no such thing as orthodoxy. He seems to follow Aquinas in holding that reason is sufficient for the understanding of everything, and that revelation is provided only because no one lives long enough (or reasonably enough) to get that job done on his own. In *The Abolition of Man* he tackles a pertinent dilemma, which, like all of the nastiest dilemmas, seems utterly to have escaped the notice of those who most need to wrestle with it.

When we establish a New Order and bring in a New Way, we intend to make something that is *better*. But should we have to give an account of that betterness, and not merely assert it, but *show* it, we always end up justifying the New Way by discovering its license of legitimacy in the Old Way.

We may, for instance, decide that the children should be forced to perform charitable acts in order to earn credit toward financial aid in college, and thus establish a New Morality in which the worth of the deed is unrelated to the will of the doer, but we will justify it with the strength of the Old Morality, out of which we know what we mean by a charitable act, and know, also, that it is good, and that its goodness, unlike the goodness of the forced charitable act, stands in no need of justification beyond itself.

And that is what Lewis means by the Tao, and not, as Kirk says, a “list of religious convictions.” When we go to give an account of the goodness of this or that act, or plan, or sentiment, or anything of which a human is capable, we always end up in the same place, in some not very large body of lore, which seems, furthermore, from the evidence of folklores and mythologies, to have been known to all people at all times. Religions need the Tao, of course. Without it they would have nothing but their fantasies. The Tao needs no religions.

It is not out of religious belief, or out of “respect for the law” either, that you know what judgment to make of a judge whose verdict is bought, or, for that matter, buyable. In fact, religious belief is what it is, and the law is what it is, out of respect for the Tao. And this is just as clear to schoolchildren as to jurists. But why? Just *how* do we know that? Does our “knowledge” itself stand in need of an accounting? Where, behind that

knowledge, as it were, could we go to justify it, as we can go behind the New Way and justify it by the Old? Or, should we want to debunk it, and bring in a new order in which no one sees anything wrong with a bought verdict, where will we find the root of that old knowledge, that we may cut it off, and cure the people of their delusions about bought verdicts? The apparent impossibility of answering such questions is what brings Lewis to say of the Tao that it is because it is, and that there is no place beyond it to go to. And it is an asserted answer to such questions that gives religions what power they have.

The school people are, and who can blame them, afraid of the religions, since an assertion, where no evidence can be shown, has no answer but a contrary assertion. But they are *so* afraid of the religions that they grant them more credence than they deserve. When the religionists claim to be proprietors of the Tao, the school people bow down. They say, Oh, well, in that case we will come up with another Way, our own relevant product. And we see what that has brought us. And then they say, like the members of the Excellence Commission, Oh, well, we were really supposed to stick to the academic stuff anyway.

Now what, we wonder, are those remarkable “academics” that they have nothing to do with the Tao? Is there some “subject” that we can study and find in it no implications about rightness and wrongness, about equality and inequality, about harmony, balance, or consequence? Is there some scholarly enterprise utterly divorced from industriousness, discipline, and honesty? Do none of those academics tell stories of people, and how they do?

Well, that may be the case. Maybe the schoolers have finally perfected the absolutely relevant curriculum, the one that would also be the only possible absolutely meaningless curriculum.

## The Other Bird

*There are two birds in the tree of life.  
One eats. The other watches.*

**H**OW much study does it take to bring us into wisdom? How many books do we have to read, and which ones? Are some courses of study essential? Some degrees? Is there something,

some thought, some masterpiece, some one critical fact, without which no one can understand what everyone should understand? Are there—horrors!—many such?

Consider poor Doktor Faust. He had studied—and mastered—Music and Art, the Sciences, natural and otherwise, Medicine, Philosophy, History, Philology, yes, and even (ugh!) Theology. (The “ugh” is his, not ours.) He had read all the books, passed all the courses, earned all the diplomas.

And, through his great labors he had come to realize that he knew nothing, nothing at all. He was neither joking nor posing, and he certainly wasn’t being humble. He meant it, and, we think, he was right. Being informed is obviously not the same as knowing, and it is only through a looseness of language that we “know” the capital of Arizona or the number of feet to the yard. If we are strict about our words, we soon come to see that only things we seem secure in “knowing” are strangely remote and cold, like undeniable propositions about the equal and opposite angles created by intersecting lines. They’re right, of course, but neither consoling no edifying. They do not satisfy our natural desire to know.

And that’s why we torment ourselves with wondering how many books it will take, and which ones.

Stop worrying about it. We will tell you, here and now, how to attain all the knowledge, and wisdom, that is possible to ordinary mortals. Here it is: Take one book. Read in it every day of your life. When you are not reading it, consider it. Praise it. Damn it. Dispute it. Damn your praise, and praise your damning. Dispute your disputations. Weigh the consequences of believing what your book believes. Consider the consequences of not believing what your book believes. In the light of what your book says, look at your life and your deeds. In the light of your life and deeds, look at what your book says. Meditate in the still watches of the night...

Wait! No. Don’t do that. Instead, take one paragraph, and do all those things every day of your life. Meditate on it in the...

No. Wait! That’s too much, too. It’s more than a mortal can bear. Take a line, a single line. It’ll do.

And if you can’t come up with the right line of the right paragraph of the right book just now, use the one we’ve given you above: “There are two

birds in the tree of life. One eats. The other watches.”

It is a line from an old book, a very old book. Older than the Bible, older than Homer. In those days, there was no one who “knew” the capitals of the states or the place of sulfur in the periodic table, no one who had heard Bach or read Milton. The information they lacked was immeasurable. But so, too, is ours, and in that we are no better than they. And, in fact, if we have never thought about those two birds, we are far worse off than they. With that one bit of “knowledge,” they could easily have been happier, and kinder, and in every way better, than we.

And that is also to say, more “educated,” set free, than we, who have generally lost sight of that other bird, and who spend our lives in the scramble of eating, of feeding our faces and our fears and our passions and our egos, of hustling to sell to each other what no one needs and bestowing all too *gratis* on each other what no one wants, and hastening home at the end of the day to hear word of the latest fire of suspicious origin in an abandoned warehouse, and every fascinating and absolutely essential detail of the tawdry misbehavior of the sports stars, and ditto of the tedious amours of politicians and other entertainers, so that we may sleep informed, to rise another day and hand out more of what nobody wants. And to all of that, we add the grinding fear that some greedy, materialistic, and self-serving industrialist will give us cancer with his noxious waste so that we won’t live as long as we want to, enjoying the rich fruits of this life.

I, too, thought you had in mind Revolution, a purging of the Public Schools of those seemingly better fitted to sell used cars, and a putting in their stead real pedants, classicists and Jesuit priests. I, too, thought of you as a modern Tom Paine, trying to whip us readers off our couches.

But I realize now that your words are spoken, like those of Socrates, for no one but me, your pupil. I don’t know how many copies of the UG you mail, but the only one that matters is the one I receive. I have no idea how many copies of *The Voyage Out* are in existence, or how many have seen the Ghost Sonata, or have heard Alicia deLarrocha play. What matters is not the

company I keep, or how secure I felt being part of a group. What matters is how my “interaction” with all of the above *creates me*. As you have said time and time again, education is what happens silently, and often undetectably, in the privacy of one’s soul when one comes in contact with an educated person. I am left with the desire to emulate the person I admire. But to do that I must tune my own engine. No one can do it for me because the engine is invisible to all eyes by my inward one.

But my present intention is not to tell you what you’ve told me, or, for that matter, to pat you condescendingly on the back for holding the pass—while the multitudes mill around wondering if all the evidence is in—but to predict that if you do take off on the road to reform, I will not follow. You have taught me well.

The eating bird does one thing. All the time. It stops only once. Still, we like it better than the watching bird. The watching bird does nothing at all. That’s un-American. We hate it. Our schools hate it, and devote themselves exclusively to feeding the eating birds in their children, and encouraging them to get all they can.

Pick up some skills. Get jobs. Make money. Get up and get going, commute, and compete. Put on some culture, so that you can hold your own in discussions which assume the knowledge of the capitals of the states and the winners of Academy Awards. Learn to compute, and to communicate. Yes, above all, communicate! It keeps your mind out there—away from yourself; it keeps you relating to others. It protects you from the dread danger of finding yourself, some day, alone, all alone, with nothing but your own resources. Keep the channels open. Look ahead. Look out. Be civic. Think of the future. Think about what is far away and yet to come—the tribulations of Bangladesh, the end of the ozone layer, and the threat of foreign competition. Think of Outer Space, but never, never, of Inner Space. There may be strange creatures there.

The eating bird is the activist in us all. He is very interested in current events, and the weather report. He supposes that something important will happen, or fail to happen, if he doesn’t happen to know what has happened. He doesn’t even know

that the watching bird is watching. An entire education, and perhaps even a whole curriculum, could be designed with the intent of bringing people into that condition in which they come to notice the watching bird, and learn to watch with it. And that is why we have printed the unusual letter that you might have read on the previous page. If not, please read it now.

It is, of course, a letter from one of your colleagues, a reader. It gratified us, to be sure, but it instructed and amazed us as well. It told us something that we didn't know.

As it happens, we are acquainted with the very person whom our reader calls his teacher. As a real person who walks about and does things in the world, he is no fit teacher at all. He is querulous and disorderly. He does often what no teacher should do ever: he disapproves. He contends, and complains. And, worst of all, he judges. Socrates did none of those things, and he would have advised, like others of the wise, to leave judgment to those who *know*, among whom he did not count himself. No, our reader's teacher is a fraud, and not Socrates. No one is Socrates. Socrates wasn't Socrates.

Sometimes we wish that the record had not been so well kept, or that all traces of Socrates outside of Plato had disappeared forever in the destruction of the library in Alexandria. Thus we might be able to think of Socrates as what the Socrates we know actually is: an emblem, a construction of the imagination, a "hero" in the truest sense of that word, a principle made visible in the form of a particular. No living, acting human being could have been the Socrates we see in Plato, in whom, for all that banqueting, there is no eating bird. In the Socrates who walked the streets of Athens, there was indeed an eating bird, an activist. No one can live otherwise.

It is interesting to notice that our reader does think about living otherwise, that he reaches a condition that must be called, in our schools, in our businesses, in the halls of government, and in our churches as well, where Martha has driven out Mary, anti-social and selfish. He will pay some price for that, but there is nothing to be done about it. The eating birds sees only the other eating birds, and always supposes that there must be something "wrong" about those in whom the watching bird is awake.

What speaks, and always speaks, in the Socrates of the Dialogues, is the watching bird. And what speaks in the letter from our reader is the watching bird. We are not his Socrates; he is his Socrates. He is not our pupil; he is his pupil. That "educated person" who affects him is no one but himself.

All of which is to say, all disconcertingly, that while no one is Socrates, everyone is Socrates.

There must, of course, be some of us who are simply unable to watch. Infants, probably, but only for a while—and the mad, perhaps for always. But the complete lack of the ability to watch simply must be accounted an acquired deficit, not a trait of character or a genetic inheritance, but an injury, a loss of something that ought to have been there in the territory we call "human." That such a loss is possible at all is frightening enough; much more frightening is the possibility that it may be brought about in those who are neither infants nor lunatics.

Can the watching bird die, while the eating bird goes on eating? What would kill it? Is it born sleeping, and waiting to be awakened? What will awaken it? What prince must kiss that sleeping beauty? Is he lollygagging in some tavern? Eating? What if he's just not up to the job?

Hmm. Now that we have come up with those questions, we've decided to fight for Reform after all. And just who is that chap following us, we wonder.

### And furthermore...

**O**UT in Pullman, Washington, they have a, well, a sort of a school, apparently, where they...teach stuff. It's called Washington State University, and it sounds like a real neat place.

They have something they call the Hotel and Restaurant Management Program. And why not? We certainly wouldn't want the hotels and restaurants left unmanaged, which they surely would be if the educationists of Washington hadn't persuaded the legislators of Washington to extract some money from the taxpayers of Washington to provide for the needs of the hotel and restaurant owners of Washington, who can hardly be expected, all by themselves and at their own expense, to train the people who are going to manage their hotels and restaurants, now can they?

Now, perhaps troubled in his conscience for having profited by all that enforced largesse of the taxpayers, a certain Taco Bell has put up one quarter of a million bucks so the Hotel and Restaurant Program people can go out and hire someone for its brand new Distinguished Professorship of Fast Food Service.

It's not going to be easy. All the distinguished scholars of fast food, those who make the original and significant contributions to knowledge in that subject, are surely well-situated, and will hardly be tempted away by the interest on a measly quarter of a million.

Even at eight percent, that comes to about forty thousand bucks a year, and any distinguished fast food scholar could do a lot better than that just by opening a franchise.

*Nil, however, desperandum.* To get Mr. Bell's money, the legislators of Washington generously put up another quarter of a million of the taxpayers' money as a matching grant. Now that's a little more like it.

Our associate circulation manager sometimes actually makes, and eats, his own lunch. Today, he set a timer. The whole operation, the making, the eating, and the simultaneous reading of the editorial page of the Sunday paper, took three minutes and eleven seconds. He's going to write it up and send in his vita.

Yes, this issue is late. And that's not all. The next two issues, April and May, will be correspondingly late. But we think we can fix all that. Suppose we stop using the names of the months, and stick to numbers? We'd be interested to hear what you think—unless you happen to be a librarian.

*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, i.e., libraries, \$25, or 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 Thirteen, Number Three . . . . . April 1989



## The Pi-eyed Pipers

HERE'S an entertaining prospect: Think of all the little children in school. They are sitting around a table, or maybe broken up into small groups—often broken up, those little children—clutching in their little hands some little rulers and tape-measures. Their beaming teacher passes sweetly among them, giving, to this one, the lid of a mayonnaise jar, to that one the mayonnaise jar itself, to another the hula hoop that has been waiting all these years in the Hands-on Educational Supply closet, to another a paper picnic plate, and so on to all. Round and round she goes, grandly bestowing circular objects of every sort, till every child has, in his very hands, at last, after all these ages of ignorance and uncertainty, the golden key to mathematical understanding, the great round lens of Euclid, through which he looked on beauty bare.

This, please be assured, is not the New Math. No, no. This time—*this* time for sure—the educationists know what to do. Pfu! on the New Math; they were deceived in those bad old days. Now they have discovered the *New New Math*, and everything will be different from now on. Just you wait and see.

Learning by experience. That's the trick of it. Those little kiddies will take their tapes and their rulers in hand, and they will measure. With the tiniest tips of their little tongues protruding, and their little eyes all squinched up, they will decide how far it is from one edge of the hula hoop to the other, and then, with equal meticulousness, how far a little lady-bug would have to toddle to make it all the way around. And then, oh wow, they will divide!

In the long run, after oodles of hands-on measuring, and reams of scribbled division, followed by vigorous bouts of averaging, they will discover, say the preachers of the *New New Math*, and utterly by their own sociable enterprise, that

pi is somewhere more or less in the approximate neighborhood of 3.14.

Now won't that be wonderful, and far better than being *told* some value of pi by some authority figure? Well, sure. And with all that hands-on experience behind them, won't those children be able to come up with other marvels, the more or less approximate value of the square root of two, for instance? And all by themselves? You better believe it.

We heard about the New New Math just a week or so after we were invited, along with everybody else on the face of the earth, to explore a different sort of mathematical consideration by William Raspberry, a columnist who is sometimes taken in by the educationists, but not always. In this case, he was chewing over a special case of the general proposition of educationism, which holds that whatever it is that the schools obviously don't know how to do should probably not be done in any case.

The special case was this: Look, how much math does the ordinary person do? A little adding and subtracting, maybe, and even a spot of multiplication now and then. If you have to tile the floor, the salesman will help you; he'll likely have a chart. But, be honest, how long has it been since you've found a square root, or solved an equation with more than one unknown? So, come on. Let's not bother the kids with anything more than the little smattering of math with which all the rest of us are getting by very well indeed. We'd save lots of time and money, and we could still offer more advanced math for those few kids who, for some reason or other, seem to like it.

Raspberry was puzzled. He clearly did not like that proposition, but neither could he see any way to reject it. It seems to make sense—common sense—which is the faculty by which we can all know that the earth is flat. So he left himself in puzzlement, and able only to wonder if someone there might be who would take up one cudgel or the other. It was a decent request, nothing less, we hope, than, Come, let us reason together. So we will not be displeased should this piece fall into the hands of William Raspberry, but we will not put it there. And here's why: Any human person can figure it out alone, provided, of course, that he has studied enough math, and language, out of which combined studies we most easily take the

propensity—and the skill—for a certain way of thought.

If we study mathematics so that we may *do* mathematics, the proposition is excellent. We should reject it only if we can find some other purpose for that study, which may provide not what only a few may need, but which many must need. And, if Raspberry, like us, is in the habit of reading the comics section of the *New York Times*, he may by now have found out what that might be.

It was in that paper, of course, that we heard all about the children who are going to find the value of pi. That, too, was puzzling. To us, as to almost every other living person, the value of pi is—well, not very interesting. We certainly don't use it, and anyone who does can easily look it up, or, to be more accurate, can look up today's value of pi. They keep adding more decimal places; it's sort of like the stock market, up a bit, down a bit. Who knows where it will all end? And if mathematics is something that children study so that they may know the value of pi, then it certainly ought to be stamped out straightaway.

But the New New Math seems to be something even worse, something that children study not in order to know the value of pi, but in order to *estimate* it, and badly, at that, with the crudest of tools and the grossest of measurements. And whatever for?

Alas, we think we know what for. It is so that the children will come to imagine a vain thing, and to believe what the educationists already believe, to wit, that they can learn from experience.

No one learns from experience. Experience does not teach; it trains and conditions. If experience were truly a teacher, then all who live would be wise, for there is no deficit of experience in any life. What teaches is reflection, the mind's poetry, experience recollected in tranquillity. A man who has had nothing but the experience of sitting on a hot frying pan will not sit back down on that hot frying pan again, just now, but he will see no reason not to sit on it tomorrow, or on a hot waffle iron, for that matter, unless he has done something in his mind.

Although Franklin really called experience not the best teacher, but the hard school and last resort of fools, our educationists, who imagine that training and conditioning are education, are

unable to see the difference between “learning” how to build a table, where training and conditioning are useful, and learning mathematics, where they are the barest beginnings.

Measuring hoops and jar lids is surely an experience. So what do the New New Mathers imagine that children will “learn” from it? What can possibly be learned from it? Not even an educationist can suppose that there is some “real” value of pi, just waiting to be discovered with a cracked wooden ruler and a grubby piece of string, and that some lucky child will come up with it, thus proving that we *can* compete with the Japanese, who are still floundering around in the umpty-umphth decimal. Is there some covert “democratic” goal in this weird exercise, some suggestion that such things as the value of pi ought to be established by consensus and compromise? And if, by some very small but happy chance, some child should happen to *reflect* on the experience of measuring hoops and lids, would he not conclude that his schooling had provided him with vain and empty busywork whose product, while easily to be had without any measuring, was of no conceivable use to him? Will the New New Math not flourish all the better in the absence of reflection, where it was obviously conceived?

There is, of course, a good reason for revealing the mystery of pi to children, and an even better reason for letting the children discover that mystery for themselves. When they have made a hundred—or a million—measurements, and found them all different, they will be standing at a fork in the path. In the New New Math, apparently, they will be told that they have “discovered” that pi is “about 3.14,” and praised, no doubt, for having “learned” something all by themselves. And something will have been settled.

In some other way of studying math, they would be led to notice, not only that they still do not *know* the value of pi, but that it may be unknowable, and that one who knows that there is something that cannot be known, can nevertheless know something else of great value. It is simply this: that the mind alone can make knowledge that no amount of experience will ever bring.

These school people keep making us think of that strange notion of Aristotle, that a student of astronomy should be careful not to look at the stars. It is not all that absurd. The children would

do better to put away their little tools and not even to look at circles, but simply to think. For it is by thinking, and only by thinking, that we can know that a circle and its diameter are what the geometers call incommensurate line segments. That means that there is no unit of measurement, however small, with which both lines can be numbered. That is why pi is called an irrational number; it can not be expressed in any fraction, or as a ratio of one whole number over another, however large those numbers might be. This is strange knowledge.

(You can prove it for yourself, by the way, even if you have forgotten all your geometry, or never even studied it. It’s only incidentally math; essentially, it’s just mind work. If you need some hints, read the *Meno*, in which Socrates leads a little boy into the mystery of another pair of incommensurable line segments, the side and the diagonal of the square.)

That knowledge, that the mind can know what experience can never show, is probably the most important event in the history of a mind. It brings countless benefits. It provides a nice distinction between information and knowledge, for such things as the capital of Texas and the betting average of Pete Rose, of which the wisest mind in Greece could have “known” nothing, are now revealed as something not exactly the same as knowledge, but dependent entirely upon experience, and never to be discovered by the mind alone. Not the greatest of minds, by taking thought, can work out the names of the Academy Award winners of 1949, although any clod can look it up. But anyone at all, even the greatest clod, if properly led, can learn to spot a *non sequitur*.

Between those things that we can learn in ourselves with our minds, and those things that we can learn only out of the experiences of our bodies, because we have eyes and ears, there are interesting differences both of quality and quantity. The latter are countless and cheap, like the vain, innumerable numbers that the children will derive. The former, while few, cost more; far too much to be handed out in the schools.

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

## The Slough of Disparity

The following five areas of disparity in education will be examined:

1. Instructional contact based on student response opportunities and teacher acknowledgement.
2. Grouping organization based on wait time and physical closeness.
3. Classroom control/discipline based on physical touching and reproof of students.
4. Enhancing self-esteem based on probing students and listening.
5. Evaluation and student performance based on higher level questioning and analytical feedback.

WELL, honi soit and all that, but we still find that stuff a little bit smutty. So what could all that mean—”based on physical touching,” and, even worse, “based on probing students”? Come to think of it, we can’t even figure out what “based on” could possibly mean in that passage. Try it for yourself.

And that’s not all. Later on in the same document we hear that teachers will observe one another and “code areas of student-teacher interaction.” So how would you like it if we coded some of your areas of interaction, based on a little probing, eh? And then there’s a bit about some “more satisfying relationships with students.” Hmm.

But no, wait. This is not part of the evidence from one of those group child molestation cases out in California. It’s strictly on the up and up, and absolutely legit. After all, it comes from nothing less respectable than the Douglas Education Service District, out in Roseburg, Or., where they’d never put up with what used to be called, delicately but quite distinctively, interfering with children. In fact, if you will consider once more what is proposed above, you will see that no one intends to interfere with any children, only with teachers.

You probably don’t know what an Education Service District is. Here’s how it goes. Education starts, and ends, with two people. One of them generates some sort of current in the other, or maybe not. If not, that’s the end of the whole

business. Wait till later. Or just forget it. But school is different. It still starts, and ends, with two people, but others get into the act. Because there is a teacher in a classroom, there has to be a crew of people who don’t teach but who supervise and coordinate and facilitate one who does. And the members of that crew stand in need of the same services. Thus it is that, in every state, you can find buildings full of really super educators who have never actually seen one of those children whom they educate. An Education Service District is what they call such a building in Oregon.

The Douglas Education Service District is one of twenty-nine such in the state. They are separate from the herds of educators who hang out in the Superintendent of Schools Building; in fact, they educate those people as well as the children. The Douglas District has about 130 position holders, almost all of them people who were trained as what we now call, with a delicacy no less elegant than that out of which our elders named interference with children, special education teachers.

One hundred and thirty times twenty-nine is three thousand, seven hundred and seventy. That is a big bunch of educators. And are they ever busy. Consider the project described in the document we have quoted above. It is nothing less than a full-blown Staff Development Program sponsored by the Curriculum and Career/Vocational Education Departments. Yes, both. And it is called by an appropriately evocative name: Excellence through Equity, which must begin, of course, with an examination of areas—areas of disparity.

Ah, the educators of educators. Notice that the numbered areas are first called “five areas,” to guard against the not inconsiderable chance, these days, of innumeracy in schoolteachers. And then the areas are named, perhaps so that we can code them. Instructional contact is an area. Grouping organization, another. The classroom control/discipline area and the enhancing self-esteem area do not exactly share a boundary, but they’re both fine areas, and worthy of examination based on something. Last, whether least or not, there is the currently popular evaluation and student performance area, which, a few years ago, was being called the accountability area. But for one reason or another, the name never took.

Maybe it was because an accountability area can't possibly be based on such neat stuff as that higher level questioning and analytical feedback.

Now, we have told you that all this nonsense is named Excellence through Equity, and so it is. That is the name that appears at the top of the page. Farther down the page, however, we find the dotted line along which a school teacher eager to examine areas can tear, so as to send in a little scrap of paper that will take the place of a note asking for further details. In that place, we can read the putative words of the applicant, who is forced by the text to express interest not in Excellence through Equity, but in Equity through Excellence. It is not surprising, of course, that such a mistake should slip through in a document that comes from Sydney Poole, who is, after all, a Community Mentors Partnership Coordinator; only a reader would have noticed it. In all these years of studying the education business, we have yet to encounter even one Community Mentors Partnership Coordinator who can actually read what he himself has written. That takes a bit more reflection than a busy educator has time for. And we do suspect that, even if he had noticed that strange inversion, he would probably have said, So, big deal; they'll know what I mean.

And that's the weirdest part of this weird business. He'd be right. "They" would know what he "means," which is, of course, nothing in particular, which doesn't bother "them" at all. Those are just some words, trendy and attractive.

Try for yourself to attach a clear, concrete meaning to either version of the title. Let's see. Equity through Excellence? If we make everybody excellent they'll be equal? Or, maybe they'll all be equitable? Just what sort of excellence could cause that? Excellence in grades? In self-esteem? How would we know? Or what about Excellence through Equity? Does that mean that everything will be hunky-dory when everybody is equal, or equitable, or both, or what? Or does it mean—which sounds like something an educationist might believe—that if everybody treats everybody equitably, everybody will be excellent? Does either one mean all of those things, or none of those things, or anything at all?

But with such vexing speculation we will be led astray. It is not to the point. The phrase isn't really intended to take its power or worth from its meaning. What counts is how it sounds, and how

it will look on the certificate that will be awarded, along with two graduate credits, to any school teacher who will come to six monthly workshops. When the "graduates" apply for new jobs or promotions, the non-teaching educationists who do all the really important stuff in schools will not be distracted by reflection. They do not read; they just look. They will look at Excellence through Equity and say, Oh, good. Or if it comes to that, they will look at Equity through Excellence and say, Oh, good.

In any case, nothing is written in this document *about* either equity or excellence, or just *how* the one might produce the other, or the other, the one. The stated goals, in fact, "collegiality" and "relationships" and such, all suggest that school teachers can put off worrying about equity and excellence for quite a while, and sign themselves up for a short course in character building.

Our school teachers must all be sick, or depraved, and much in need of therapy. They are always going to remedial workshops, refreshers, pep rallies, and psych sessions. Physicists and surgeons do go to natter with other physicists and surgeons about their work, but when teachers gather to consider their work, they do not go to listen to other teachers. They go to facilitators and change agents, to functionaries who have never been teachers, or who stopped being teachers as quickly as possible. And always they go not with their minds in mind, but with their sentiments, to get in touch with feelings, to get the feel of touchings. And to learn, of all things, how to be decent and kind, and to pay a little respectful attention to other people, for that, after all, is what all those "areas of disparity" imply. It is as though they became teachers only because they were all unconscionable, inconsiderate egotists and boors, raised in an uninhabited area of disparity by animals, and now must be taught, by their betters, the simplest and most obvious lessons of civil human intercourse.

If that's true, we should give thanks to the functionaries. If not, the teachers ought to give them something else.

#### **A Word from**

#### **The Associate Circulation Manager**

The votes are in. We didn't count them. We lost. We simply awarded the victory to the reader

who wrote: “How lovelier is April than 4.” So what would you have done?

Accordingly, we will continue to print the names of the months, and not numbers, on each issue, no matter how late it is.

### Brief Notes

FOR some reason or other, not entirely clear, we do not keep track of the great victories that we have won over the forces of schooling. In fact, we haven’t felt, until just recently, any need even to keep track of the points. But we may have won one, or at least the hint of a faint shadow of a point, sort of.

Back in 1985, we did a little piece about a certain Larry Zenke, at that time the superintendent of schools in Tulsa. He had run off at the mouth quoting some futurist he had heard about, and telling the folk of Tulsa that the hour would come, and perhaps now was, when Americans would all be illiterate but still the most knowledgeable people in the world. He explained, more or less, that devices of some sort would tell the people “what they needed to know.” Loudspeakers, we presumed.

Zenke recently pulled out of Tulsa and became superintendent of schools in Jacksonville, Florida. There, some remarkably enterprising reporter dug up our piece, which some of you may remember. It was called “Nox quondam, nox futura,” and it was not kind. The reporter waved it at Zenke. Hey, what about this? Zenke, although he was one of very few victims who registered a complaint, was unable to remember any such business. Then, he did remember. Before it was all over, we had to send a very junior member of our staff to do a satellite hook-up between a Philadelphia TV station and one in Jacksonville. Such excitement. Nothing came of it.

But who knows. Is it not possible that even a school superintendent may some day say in his heart, in the still watches of the night, Well, dammit, I was a bit of a fool? Well, maybe that’s why we shouldn’t worry about keeping track of our great victories. If we ever have any, they will be, as they should be, invisible.

WE have heard from Annette Kirk, from whom we quoted last month. She is, we suppose, the wife of Russell Kirk, who is among other things,

the editor of *The University Bookman*. Of her work—and his, for both are thoughtful writers interested in distinguishing education from its counterfeits—we intend to say more in another issue.

*The University Bookman* is a small quarterly journal that we first saw a few years ago when a reader who had a poem published in it sent us a copy. We know nothing of its guiding spirit, if any, or of its ideological bias, if any. We do know that we find something worth thinking about in every issue, and we commend it to you. It’s a steal—a mere \$5 a year. It is published by Educational Reviewer, Inc, and to be found at Post Office Box 3070, Grand Central Station, New York NY, 10017. Just tell them we sent you.

*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, i.e., libraries, \$25, or more.

---

\*\*\*\*\*

# The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Thirteen, Number Four . . . . . May 1989

\*\*\*\*\*

### Clouds on the Horizon

LITTLE CLOUDS, to be sure. Not larger than an educationist’s hand. Airy, fluffy nothings, and yet...and yet... It is of just such stuff that the dreams of educationists are made, and also the future of educationism’s Cloud Cuckoo Land in America, which is also the future of souls beyond counting.

---

The Torrence Unified School District of Los Angeles requires, as the state of CA requires, that its students write essays every spring so that

someone or other may scrutinize their skills. This year, someone or other has decided to scrutinize a little more than their skills in English. The essays were bundled up and handed over to some people who are identified as “psychologists.” The said psychologists have examined the essays for signs of anti-social tendencies and traces of a more-than-normal knowledge about drugs.

Cute. Very cute. First you tell them all about clean needles and freebasing, and then you nail the little suckers because they know just a little too much about clean needles and freebasing. And, as always in the schools, one palm greases another; lots of kids found themselves sent off for little chats with their local guidance counselors, who are always in need of pretexts for their existence.

But the “anti-social tendencies” business is even more interesting. Those school people surely have a list of same tucked away in some file cabinet. Is it, we wonder, as long as their list of “learning disabilities,” which, the last we heard, was up above three hundred? Since some of our readers are working undercover as moles in the schools, we may yet be able to tell you about the California School Psychologists’ Great List of Anti-social Tendencies in California, but in the meantime we can make a few guesses, and so can you:

Reading a book while your classmates are solving the problem of abortion for the gay and lesbian homeless. Saying “Yes” when the visiting policeman pretending to be a drug dealer pretends to offer you a free sample of what you are supposed to pretend to be crack. Asking your English teacher how come the essay that you were asked to write as a test of your skill in composition ended up in the hands of the attitude police? OK. You can take it from there.

(You might also, just for fun, make a little list of pro-social tendencies, like unceasing vigilance, for instance, in the sniffing out of anti-social tendencies.)

---

For this one, we need a little epigraph. We’re sorry about the typography, but, as you will see, so it must be:

FINISHED FILES ARE THE RESULT OF  
YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY COMBINED  
WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF MANY YEARS.

Ready for a test? As quickly as you can, count the number of F’s in that sentence. Keep your answer to yourself. It is of no consequence to anybody but Michael Grady, a porseffor of ecudation at St. Louis University, who lectured to some forty-five people at the University of Montana—probably others of his ilk—on “Brain Research and its Implications for Education.”

If you counted six F’s, that’s because there are six F’s. But it is also because you are not the sort to attend some educationist’s lecture on brain research. Of the people who did that, most ended up counting three F’s. “People,” Grady explained, “are not used to seeing sentences written entirely with uppercase letters and it can trick people’s minds.” And, furthermore, “most people don’t count the F’s that occur in the word ‘of.’”

That in itself is weird enough, but, from that supposed fact, Grady thinks to have demonstrated “how logical thinking can lead to wrong answers.”

OK. Let’s try to get this straight. Three F’s is the wrong answer. Most people get the wrong answer because they overlook “of” when printed “OF.” That demonstrates that logical thinking can lead to wrong answers, and therefore it is merely logical to overlook “of” when printed “OF.” Yeah.

But wait. Now that we have that all figured out, Grady draws, from the same wifty exercise, the triumphant conclusion that “the brain doesn’t always work in a logical way. Sometimes it works in a very illogical way.” Oh.

So, if the brain works in a very illogical way when confronted by uppercase letters, then the wrong answer, three F’s, demonstrates that illogical thinking can lead to wrong answers. Wow. It’s a wonder we ever get anything right.

All of this, naturally, convinces Grady that we are just being too logical in the schools. “A teacher explaining the causes of the Civil War,” says Grady, “would most likely give the causes in some sort of order, such as No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3. In reality things don’t happen in nice and neat order.” Some students, he adds, would “understand the causes better if they are presented in a more ‘imaginative’ way.”

There’s a lovely, long essay planted in those silly remarks, but you’ll have to write it yourself. Just follow these simple instructions: Consider why Grady slips from *explaining* the causes into *giving* the causes, as though they were the same

thing, and then back into *understanding* the causes, as though that could result either from the giving or the explaining. Come up with three ways in which some one might give—or explain—some causes in anything other than “some sort of order.” Ask yourself what a man must mean by imagination when he thinks it not imaginative to put into some sort of order in the mind the things that don’t happen in nice and neat order in the world. And end up by wondering how all this can be seen as a way of suggesting that doing and being are quite enough, thank you, and that reflection is impractical and elitist.

And for extra credit, consider: Can it be that it needs no Lenin to engender the “useful idiot,” but that all causes call him forth quite naturally, as weather calls forth the bugs from the swamp?

(But we may have this all wrong. We found it on a torn out half sheet from a little newspaper in Montana. On the other side of the page there was a piece about a psychic healer who tunes in to the negative energy in damaged body parts. “I have this laser projection off my finger,” she says. Maybe we were meant to write about her. Well, no matter. It comes to pretty much the same thing.)

---

Last, and surely least, we bring you news of Madeline Hunter, whom we would love to mix with Michael Grady. Both educationists, both laboring in the same vineyard. And to both a penny, of course, but not for their thoughts.

Madeline Hunter goes, apparently, here and there holding seminars and workshops on how to use a blackboard, which she calls a chalkboard. The fact that she is paid for this work, although only by institutions that have money to spend that they didn’t have to earn, is in itself intriguing. Here are bunches of schoolteachers, and college professors, who go, sometimes by administrative mandate, to be told how to write stuff on the blackboard. With chalk.

Madeline—for some strange reason we can’t bring ourselves to call her by her surname—Madeline is of the old school of educationism. She specializes in the firm grasp on the obvious and the teaching of what any but the dullest half-wit will learn for himself in his first day on any job.

(This practice is deathless. It is still a large part of all course work in teacher training academies.)

To presumed grown-ups who are presumably teaching in a presumed school, she passes out sheets of paper on which four or five lines of 36 point type proclaim such things as: Say it—then write it. Erase before introducing new concept. Position = Relationship.

Aha! Let’s hear from Grady on that! Madeline puts it thus, for the benefit of the mentally impaired who attend her things: If you have Cats somewhere on the board, then you had better put Persian and Siamese somewhere nearby.

This is our only hope: that the Gradys and Madelines will meet and mate, and lecture henceforth only to each other in institutions where there are no innocent third parties. Unlike government schooling, that would be worth its cost.

### Merely Decent in the Cold

*One must think like a hero  
to behave like a merely decent human being.*

THE epigraph above is also an epigraph to John le Carré’s latest book, *The Russia House*. They are the words of May Barton, about whom, surely to our harm, we know nothing. She is probably someone we should read.

We do read everything that le Carré writes. Had we any influence, we would use it on the Nobel Prize people. His books are always about the theme that lies beneath all of our thinking, the principle that informs the sorry particulars of the life of the mind of which we so often write, to wit, the desperate lot of the individual shivering in the cold mist of foggy abstractions—the Party, the Church, the School, the State, and, foggiest and coldest of all, the monster called Society as a Whole.

In general, reviewers have not been delighted with *The Russia House*. For one thing, George Smiley is gone, and thus, of course, Alec Guinness is gone. And Karla is gone, resting comfortably, no doubt, under the name of Saunders out in the country. The Americans, with two small exceptions, look very bad indeed, which, to some reviewers, brings forth the dubious but comforting opinion that le Carré just can’t get Americans right. To us, they looked just

right. Furthermore, there is indeed very little of what is called “action” of the sort expected in what is called “the spy thriller.” No sudden death. No dagger. Most of what happens, happens in the inner life, in the minds of persons. And it is exactly that—the inner life—that we have been taught to deem just about as interesting to watch as growing grass or drying paint. To the ordinary trainee produced by our informing institutions, anything at all, football, lotteries, Vanna White, clean needles, tricky congressmen, cholesterol, ozone, Donald Trump, whooping cranes, fires of suspicious origin in deserted buildings, quintuplets in Omaha, rape and robbery, or battle, murder, and sudden death—anything is found worthier to be considered than what is going on in his mind.

And that is why we must read more of May Barton. She knows the secret. She knows that what goodness we can hope to do must come not out of training, not out of disposition, not out of the fear of law or censure, not out of respect for authority or creeds, not out of cultural heritage or social membership, but out of our thinking.

She might also have said much the same thing the other way about: that a merely decent human being looks to the rest of the world like some sort of a hero. What would we say, after all, were some congressman to be exposed as nothing more than an honest man, living by principle and choosing his deeds not according to what some guidelines will permit but by thinking about worth? In him, would we not find a hero, however much his colleagues might find him a sap? Think what perfectly legal opportunities for self-inflation and enrichment he would have denied himself, to say nothing of all the re-election insurance he could so easily and so “ethically” have taken out. Think, too, how poorly he must live, out in the cold, on nothing but his salary.

But think even more about this: How could he have come to such a condition in the first place?

The narrative voice of *The Russia House* is well named Horatio B. dePalfrey. He draws his breath in sadness to tell this tale, and absents him from felicity for a long while indeed. He is a man who knows about goodness, and who recognizes it when he sees it. But he is a “devoted” man, a man who has given himself and his freedom away to an abstraction. A fascinating condition. He is at once treacherous and loyal, a loyal servant of the

state, and a betrayer of the decent person that he knows how to be. That is the condition also, of course, of George Smiley, and it is one of John le Carré’s best virtues that he shows us the hidden darkness in the hypnotic creeds and causes to which we give ourselves, and by virtue of which we discover the exquisite pleasure of deeming ourselves selfless servants of a Worthy Cause.

But the beam in dePalfrey’s eye does not affect his seeing. Of one of his colleagues, he asks himself: “What had Clive studied,...if he ever had? Where? Who bore him? Sired him? Where did the Service find these dead suburban souls with all their values, or lack of them, perfectly in place?”

The questions are familiar. But they are, perhaps, a bit too English in their frankness. Whether out of politeness or cowardice, easily confused, we will not ask of a practiced and competent opportunist, who bore him? who sired him? It is a well (and wisely) kept secret among even our schoolteachers, that for many of their students there is no hope for a decent and thoughtful life simply because their parents have never shown them any such thing, and have indeed shown them, and have, if only in symbol, commended to them, lives operated entirely by the energies of appetite and untended by reflection.

And the first of those questions is so English that its meaning might easily escape the ordinary American reader. What had he studied? It is not exactly what we would ask. We are interested, mostly for reasons that we call practical, to know what someone has learned. And with that in mind, we will also ask, in what did he major? Those questions suddenly seem pointless when we are wondering why someone lives in a certain way, and does not seem capable of living otherwise. What we truly do need to know where we detect the unprincipled and unexamined life is just what dePalfrey asks. What did he study, which is also to ask, where did he get his practice in examination and reflection, and furnish his acquaintance with the countless particulars of human experience and the remarkably few principles that inform them?

Later on, and thinking yet again of poor Clive, dePalfrey muses thus: “Clive affected to consider this on its merits. But I knew...that Clive considered nothing on its merits. He considered who was in favour of something and who was

against it. Then he considered who was the better ally.”

This is not an uncommon way of behaving. Indeed, it is frequently among those skills both taught and learned in our schools. Under various names, you can even major in it. For the little children, it is called relating well to self and others, for the bigger children, management. For the biggest children, politics.

What is required in one who would consider something on its merits, asking only if it is better or worse, without regard to consequences? Two things at least—the thoughtfulness out of which to derive and consider some principled understanding of better and worse, and the heroism out of which to choose in the light of principle without regard for the consequences. It is not easy. Who does it too often will surely find himself out in the cold some day, companied only, and only perhaps, by one obscure and impoverished congressman.

And what it takes is study, not the acquisition of techniques and information, but study—reflection, integration, comparison, thinking and rethinking, testing, criticizing, doubting, wondering, and many hours of brooding in the still watches of the night.

Now it is perfectly possible, in fact it is almost inevitable, to do well in our schools and become employable without ever having spent one moment in study. Most of the courses we offer are not suitable for study. No one needs to study such “subjects” as computer science or accounting; it is enough to learn them. And even such things as history or mathematics, which are suitable for study, are rarely taught as though they were; they can easily be reduced to empty exercises in the accumulation of skills and information, which has also the virtue of making them all the easier to “master”—which is to say, “pass.”

And all of schooling, furthermore, is justified as the path to national productivity through the happy agency of personal profit. In such a context, the idea of making judgment without regard for consequences is absurd; the “realistic” judgment must be made out of nothing but regard for consequences.

And now we can answer dePalfrey’s last question: where does the Service find these dead souls? The Service produces them. If the thoughtful hero is rare, it is because the entire

system that we call “education” is designed to produce exactly what we have, a nation of unprincipled cowards. It works.

No matter what the papers say, there is no Crisis of Ethics upon us. It is just Life as Usual, and one of its major subdivisions, Politics as Usual. Sometimes we hear about it; sometimes we don’t. If our politicians want a list of what is ethical and what is not, it is because they seek not goodness, but safety. If they were thoughtful and brave, they would need no such list.

And now our schools will teach ethics. It’s all the rage. They will provide the ethics lists to little kids, lest anyone have to think about anything. That is to say, the Service will raise up unto itself the dead souls that best serve the Service.

### **An Abolus for the Mindmen**

YOU will find, in the box below, some entertaining examples. There are some sentences that are used for dictation in a test given to applicants for secretarial jobs. Just below them, you will find the results as transcribed by a young lady applying for such a job. Her mistakes are entertaining, no doubt, but less entertaining to her than to us.

To be effective, secretaries must possess an efficient mind and a congenial personality. Errors and omission must be kept to a minimum.

To be a affective secretaries must an effective mind and a genie and a persoanity. Errors and ommission must be kept to a mindmen.

The ambulance arrived and brought the Smiths’ dog to the canine hospital.

The abolus, arrived and brought the Smith’s dog to the cannie hospital.

On Wednesday, February 23, the library will probably have its lease cancelled.

One Wednesday, February 23 the libiary will probibly can its lease cancel.

We read about this young lady in one of Mike Royko's columns. Although he certainly doesn't think of himself as such, and although he only rarely deals with the topic, Royko is one of our ablest commentators on so-called education in America. Read him if you can.

The young lady did not get the job. It is no big deal. Lots of people don't get the jobs they want. It is only the pursuit of happiness that we are promised. But it is too bad, because she happens to be in hock to the feds for about \$5500. That was how much of our money they loaned her so that she might go to school and learn how to be a secretary with a genie and a persoanity, but ended up, alas, carried off in an abolus.

Well, to be more precise, the feds did not actually loan her the money. They handed it over to the guys who run the school, one of those proprietary training schools. Of the president and the dean we know nothing. Dino and Cheech, perhaps. They took the money and spent it on something, and on something else they didn't spend it. It's for the lack of that something else that this girl is in hot water, but Dino and Cheech are OK.

Indeed, this may not be so great a misfortune as it seems. This one girl is in a spot of trouble, to be sure, but there are surely scores, maybe even hundreds of people involved in one way or another in this mess who are absolutely OK. The greatest good for the greatest number, no? The good old American way.

Just think of all those teachers all the way back to kindergarten, especially the ones who were far more devoted to adjusting the kiddies to the real world than to making them read irrelevant books where they might be led into self-disesteem by hard, elitist words like ambulance and canine. Think of all those advisors and guidance counsellors and pep-talkers and drug-police and bold innovative thrusters. And the principals and the superintendents and all their clerks and those neat professional consultants who came around to teach the teachers how to use the blackboards. Dino and Cheech played their part, of course, but to bring a girl to that extreme condition requires lots and lots of working together as a team.

And don't forget those feds. Try never to forget those feds. There are whole swarms of them who make livings by doing things that no one person would ever pay another person to do. Like taking

a wad of our money and handing it over to Dino and Cheech and charging it to the lifetime account of a girl who may be able to get part-time work in a fastfood joint one day and pay it off on the never-never with her Mastercard. But the feds are quite OK. Probily no one can their lease cancel.

And then, too, it is only meet and right that one person should suffer for the people. *E unam, pluribus*, maybe?

So there must be something wrong with our reasoning, that it leads us to imagine some injustice in this matter. If you can set us straight, we will gladly be instructed. But if not, do you think this might be time to buy some horsewhips?

### Summer Notes from Central Control

Central Control has a new puppy of an especially obstreperous breed and will be very busy all Summer long. By us, she sends word, however, as follows:

- Some of you are still moving about and forgetting to tell her about it. Stop it.
- She has been no more successful than the many of you who wrote in an attempt to discover the whereabouts of George Steele, publisher of the *Individualist Newsletter* that we commended to you. George Steele turns out to be even more of an individualist than we had imagined.
- She keeps hearing from people who feel guilty for reading copies, and copies of copies, sometimes for years, and who want to subscribe. That's good, but we do encourage copies, and copies of copies, and always give, at no charge, permission to reprint.
- She commends, to those of you who are willing to take another risk, *Cabbages and Kings*, a chatty personal journal, to be found at 93 Plymouth Road, Newton Highlands, MA 02161. The publisher is a minister, but we find him smart and thoughtful anyway. He is likely to stay where we say that he is.

*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, i.e., libraries, \$25, or more.



# The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Thirteen, Number Five . . . September 1989



## The Curriculum from Hell

*“For we have reached the place of which I spoke,  
where you will see the miserable people,  
those who have lost the good of intellect.”*

*Here sighs and lamentations and loud cries  
were echoing across the starless air,  
so that, as soon as I set out, I wept.*

*Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements,  
accents of anger, words of suffering,  
and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands,*

*all went to make a tumult that will whirl  
forever through that turbid, timeless air,  
like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls.*

EDWARD T. HOLLANDER is called the Chancellor of Higher Education in New Jersey. It is his job to see to it that the state mental institutions become, and remain, politically and ideologically correct. It’s not easy, but he’s amiable, he has the vocabulary down pat, and the times are on his side.

He now proposes the “affirmative action curriculum,” against which, who can be? What else is there, after all, but the negative action curriculum? It’s the same sort of elementary mind trick by which all ideologues sneak up to the high ground, favoring the really good stuff—life, maybe, or peace, or even more puzzling imponderables, like fitness. So Hollander, in this high cause, wants the various trainers and keepers in the state mental institutions to “rethink what they teach, and ... seek ways of bridging the gap between their areas of expertise and the diverse student populations in New Jersey colleges and universities.”

Although we take no clear idea at all from the metaphor of a bridge over a gap between an area and a population, we are not unaccustomed to this style of discourse, and we think we know what he

means—not, to be sure, because we can decipher his metaphor, but because we have heard it all a million times. And so have you. It’s the same old “relevance” stuff, which has now become the “race, class, and gender” stuff.

By now, we all know the argument. Surely you can’t suppose, can you, that a girl from the barrio can take any profit from studying the thought of a man from a villa, who happens also to be rotten in the earth for five hundred years? And so forth, *mutatis mutandis*. Since principles are few, and particulars beyond counting, such cases can be made without end, and the “argument,” by force of numbers, easily persuades the shallow mind. Furthermore, in these days, everybody likes to feel like a victim, and by virtue of victimhood to claim not only the sympathy but some portion of the fortune of everybody else. You will have little trouble convincing the girl from the barrio that the man from the villa has done her some damage and injustice, and that he could not possibly know anything about her experience, and that he was a member of an oppressive and elitist clique of which we have already had quite enough, thank you. Then you can require her to study instead that exciting new “area of expertise,” Literature as Revenge—the lyrics of pop singers, the sullen remonstrations of other victims, and the Look How Deeply I Feel And Have Suffered free verse of the wandering, poetry reading minstrels of the wretched of the earth, to all of which she can relate. She will like you, and that will be nice. And you, at least, if not your entire institution, will be politically correct.

Well, why not? It is, after all, the real and not unreasonable intent of the state mental institutions to bring their wards into what can in fact be called a version of mental health, and, even without irony, right thinking and adjustment, into harmony with the world as it is, and even with the world as it is just now, for it is just now, and only just now, that they can live. And with that in mind, we would like to take the good part of Hollander’s advice, the part where he says that teachers should rethink what they teach. So they should. And more important, not only what they teach, which may find some justification in substance, but what they preach, which seldom will. And that goes for Hollander too. But he is a busy man.

So we rethink. The epigraph above is from Hell, the first book of Dante’s long and elaborate poem,

The Divine Comedy, in the old sense of “comedy.” If it is read anywhere, it is probably in a school. It is neither easy nor popular, and its usefulness in such matters as the plight of the homeless and competing with the Japanese is hard to see.

(Unlike us, all Dante knew of homelessness was a term of exile; he found “eating another’s bread” a “sorrow.”)

Now, for the purposes of excluding him from an affirmative action curriculum, we can say many things about Dante. He was a Roman Catholic, and a serious one. Not even the Roman Catholics are Roman Catholic any more. He lived in an age that was not only pre-scientific, but pre-sociological as well. He thought the existence of social classes a good thing. He was a monarchist. He believed that there could be such a thing as a wise and virtuous ruler, who ought therefore to be accorded perfect and complete obedience, although he could clearly see that such were thin on the ground. He believed in nobles, that is, he believed that some people, by birth, were at least *capable* of being better and worthier people than others. He was not at all democratic. He was not a woman, but a man, and he thought to see in Beatrice not a good mind and the potential for effective achievement, but only the good, the true, and the beautiful. Only the light.

His book, also, is hard to commend to the affirmative action curriculum. It is long, not in word count, of course, but surely in reading time. Even the most modern translations require more vocabulary than our schools provide. His poem is dense; it never vamps or coasts. His images and metaphors seem often obscure, and sometimes, impenetrable. And his allusions are mostly, to say the least, provincial, so that, among them, his references to the Guelfs and the Ghibellines are likely to be the *least* arcane, since those folk do occasionally crop up in history books. In general, he refers to countless people and events of which no student has ever heard, either in the barrio *or* in Beverly Hills. And all those people are dead and gone, and all those issues of no moment at all. To read even *Hell*, which is the easiest of the books, requires as many footnotes as some imaginable definitive edition of the complete comedies of Aristophanes.

What purpose could there be in the study of *Hell*? If it is intended as a social adornment or a

refresher for the quizzes of the cultural literacy mavens, then it should be expelled not only from the affirmative action curriculum but from all others as well. And so too, if it is to be read as an illustrated guide to the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, which, if it still exists, can be left to use it as it will. As an adjunct to the study of the history of the Renaissance (which is itself a poor candidate for the AAC,) it is of little use. It isn’t even very useful for the student of Italian (another course of study that lies ill in the AAC); its Italian is antiquated and, especially for the student in school, inordinately difficult. Although it has its share of nastiness and violence and even obscenity, very few readers will find it entertaining. Nor do many find it heart-warming or conducive to self-esteem. Its only commendation is, in these times, a condemnation: it is included in the canon of classics as devised by the once dominant class of white, upper class men. That alone is enough to prove it irrelevant to the life of the girl from the barrio and thousands and thousands of others.

In short, as a candidate for exclusion from the list of socially desirable and with-it readings, it’s a sure winner, and will probably soon be gone from state mental institutions in New Jersey. And it will, of course, not travel alone, for all of the same things, with changes only in detail, could be said of books without number from the *Iliad* to *Moby Dick* and well beyond.

Nevertheless, those who have read *Hell* will see that in all of these objections—and they are not faked—there is an amazing inappropriateness, and will be brought to wonder how anybody could possibly imagine that such considerations were, well, *relevant* to the book, even if true. And among those that stand amazed at such irrelevance will be the girl from the barrio who has read *Hell*. It never fails. And with her there will stand atheists and suburbanites and vegetarians, and even those who think of themselves as Roman Catholics.

How can this be?

Go back now and read again the epigraph. Carefully. Notice, for instance, that we are among those who have lost not intellect, which readily lends itself to anything we want to do, but the *good* of intellect, which must be something else. Wonder what that something else might be. Ask: is there some special Roman Catholic notion

hidden here, some at least religious notion, some notion that would be foreign and abhorrent to the Chinese perhaps, or the Martians, or some notion suitable to men only?

Ask yourself this: where could you go, today, to find yourself surrounded by strange utterances, horrible pronouncements, and accents of anger, all making an endless, gritty tumult, like whirling sand in the turbid air? If you are at a loss to answer, watch the news tonight.

Herein lies the power of Dante's Hell, where also lies the power of any number of works against which charges of irrelevance are so easily brought. It just happens to be true, and accurate as well. But its truth is in principle, not in particulars, which change so universally and rapidly as to seem, in any serious consideration of the business of human life, the *truly* irrelevant details.

There is a wonderful clue to the reading of Hell in a little essay by Borges. It can be found in *Seven Nights*, a book that you should read. Borges quotes from a supposed letter of Dante's son, who is explaining, in effect, that his father was not, as some still imagine, a mystic or a religious nut. (Yes, they had them then too.) He did not pretend to portray the Afterworld, but rather to show how we do live here and now. All of us. Hell is a picture of how the sinful live. Purgatory and Paradise show, respectively, how the repentant and the saved do live, here and now. The concepts may be foreign to us, but we don't need them. We do not have to think greed a sin in order to see a truthful picture of how greedy people do in fact live. We know people whose lives are given always to pushing around and around a great stone that they love. When Thoreau shows us a similar truth in the form of a young man pushing before him, down the road of life, house and barn and land and wife and child and beasts, we would be fools to discount what he says because hardly anybody has a barn these days. But when Dante, in the passage above, shows us the plight of Jews and Arabs, pro-lifers and pro-choicers, and indeed of all factionalists of any persuasion, we would like to dismiss him because he is male, and religious, and white, and dead.

But those who would dismiss him have even more serious deficits than those in mind. Dante is indeed a member of an elite company, but it is a company neither usefully nor sufficiently defined by the discriminatory epithets now happily

adopted by the opponents of discrimination. It is the company of those writers whose work is given to the exploration of the inner life, rather than to the exposition of the outer life. Imagine some list of works to be prized in the affirmative action curriculum, and, in another column, works like Hell, which are not "correct." In the correct works there is an implicit message: Look away! Look at the world out there. Account for yourself, if you must, by all that is not in you. For your miseries and your misdeeds, hold the world to blame. In the incorrect works, the message is this: Look within. See what you are. And, in Hell specifically but not uniquely: See how your miseries and your misdeeds fondle and kiss each other.

Be practical. Consider what is called "sex education." It is, like all the pretend educations, moved by the spirit of column A. It is a how to do in the world workshop. Now consider another study, a thorough reading of the fifth canto of Hell, where the weightless lustful, in perpetual free fall, are blown about by hellish winds. They have no rest; they go where the wind goes. They remind us that levity is the loss of gravity. And the endless flight of the flighty is not some punishment visited upon them by dour and puritanical authority; it is what they chose. Now they have it. To share their fate, you do not have to be dead. And, excepting only the very young, there is no living human being who will not understand what Dante is talking about, understand and nod. And sigh.

The wind is like the rain; it blows on all alike. When it blows, who will stand, and who will fly away? What makes the difference? Where does the power to stand come from; can it be cultivated? Should it be cultivated? Are there other winds that blow? Which is freedom, the power to stand, or the intoxication of flying with the wind?

These are interesting questions, and parents not depraved or moronic would, given the choice, want their children to consider them rather than to live in ignorance of them. The lifelong consideration of such questions is the substance of true education, as opposed to all the other stuff. But the socializing educationists, for some surely fascinating but unknown reason, hate such questions, and would, without reading the book, expel Dante from the sex education program not only for all the reasons that we have already

given, but also because he is obviously ignorant of the moral revolution, and never even mentions the threat of AIDS and the importance of clean condoms. To that sort of thing, which can be sufficiently disposed of in ten minutes in a pamphlet, they will allot long and costly seasons of “study.” To the other study, which fosters meditation rather than rapping, and consulting with the self rather than with a peer group, they dare not give ten minutes?

Why? Hollander, although he surely didn’t mean to, provides an answer. “We must do,” he says, “what is both morally right and educationally sound to ensure that our students are intellectually and culturally equipped to function and live in a global and highly diverse society.” Diversity is big these days. There is money to be made in it, grants to be granted, programs to be funded, facilitators to be hired. And there is merit to be earned. The praise of diversity brings out the vote; it pays off a supposed debt to the diverse, who, it must be presumed, have always been slighted and offended by the undiverse. And a Hollander, who is decidedly undiverse, can make big points by spreading a table before the diverse in the presence of their enemies, and generously bidding them, well, not exactly to *his* banqueting table, but to their own barbecue, where he will let them eat whatever they like. And if on that menu they should find, and why not, their Dante, will he not, by the very powers that make him their Dante, will he not suddenly come to be numbered among the undiverse, and stricken from the menu?

For, by clear and simple logic, if there is a Dante, and there either is or will be a Dante, in the literature of the third world or among the women, that Dante will provoke similar questions, and raise, among the educationists, the same objections. Suddenly, the color or culture or gender of that Dante will not be a ticket of admission to a new canon, and that Dante, too, will have to go.

The reason is clear. That Dante will be that Dante because, like this Dante, he or she will be no respecter of diversity. The diversities among people are, in fact, superficial and trivial. To imagine that they are important, and that they go to mold nature and character, is exactly the root of the mental disorders that we call the -isms. To imagine, for instance, that black people are so constituted that they are more easily blown away

than white people, and that that’s OK, and that the meaning of the Second Circle has nothing to do with them, a Dante will not allow. Will a Hollander? For a Dante, *the person* is the vessel of meaning; it is for the racist that the black person is the vessel of meaning, or the white. It is not to white people, or to religious people, or to Italian people, or to left-handed people, but to people that Dante can reveal the mysteries of self-searching and self-knowing, which is why a Dante has little interest in diversity. His interest is rather in what, how strange to notice, must be the true opposite of diversity. University.

And that’s what a university is, if it is a university, and not a jumped-up trade school, or a conditioning station for docile citizens, or a pulpit of ideology. It is a place devoted to the study and preservation and nurture of whatever human wisdom can be found that pertains to everybody who lives, or has lived, or ever will live, on Earth.

And it is a place for the testing of wisdom too. Schools should follow the example of THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN and present their students with readings that make no use of the names of the writers, as we do in our Great Booklets. We do not want our readers to say, Oh, this was written by that Jew, or by that communist. We want them to attend only to what is said, and to weigh *that* rather than some diversity of the author. We wonder what Hollander would say to this. Does he want the students to read Baldwin or Beauvoir that they may weigh and consider what is said, and perhaps even find fault with it, or does he, like the man who is willing to be virtuous so long as he is known to be virtuous, want the curriculum to show the names of Baldwin and Beauvoir, so that the diverse will be appeased? If the former, then let Beauvoir and Baldwin, who should be read in any case, stand anonymously on the same corner with Sophocles and Tolstoi, casting what light, and winning what approval they can. If the latter, which seems to be the case, then Sophocles and Tolstoi will have to retire, and Beauvoir and Baldwin will have to wear their name cards. Which will not please them.

Be of good cheer. The University is long, and the Hollanders are very short. There is quite enough contention, and ambition, in the University to provide a testing and weighing of them all. Some will flare for a space and sputter

out, and some will get the *Mene, mene* right away. Some will fall, only to rise again in another age. And some will move at once, and have already moved, into that canon, which really is exclusive, as it should be, but whose rules are not what our Hollanders think them.

And now we must leave off, to go back and ponder what Dante might have meant by the *good* of intellect. We have, at least, a clue. We know lots of Hollanders, and they are not short of intellect. And right there we must begin.

### The Articles of War

CONGRESS is in a flap over the flag. While this is in itself not an edifying spectacle, thoughtful folk may nevertheless take from it something of worth. In this case, we have at least been given a rare opportunity to make a point or two for Plato, who is way behind just now.

Try this. Go out into the highways and byways and find some citizen with whom you can hold high converse for a spell. Try to explain to him how it was that one of his fellow human beings could come to conclude that all of this hard and solid stuff around us is, to put it plainly, not real. Try to tell him that his furniture isn't what he thinks it is, but only a shadow of some permanent but utterly inaccessible Idea, which existed before there was any furniture, and will still be around when there is no furniture. See what happens.

Surely nothing seems more preposterous and contrary to common sense, the faculty that tells us that Earth is flat, than the Platonic idea of the Idea. And it would not be surprising should your auditor laugh you to scorn for suggesting it. At the same time, however, your auditor believes it. Unshakably.

We can know that by logic. After all, this is a democracy, in which congress stands representative of all the people. Congress believes in the Platonic Idea. And *ergo, ergo* from that.

Congress is worrying about the flag. It seems to have concluded that all the thousands and thousands of Americans who have yearned to burn the flag have now been turned loose on a helpless republic by some judges. So what to do? Should there be a new law? Should there be a constitutional amendment? How can we go on this way, knowing that some scruffy creep has burned

the flag and gotten away with it? What will the voters think if we do nothing?

Well, a congress in a quandary is one of the prerequisites of a free society, so we wouldn't want to do anything to help those patriots out, but we have been told by the people who claim to know such things that the level of the writing in this sheet is just too high for the Good of Society as a Whole, so this is not likely to fall into the wrong hands. So think about all of this. But keep it to yourself.

If you truly wanted to burn the flag, where would you go to find it? Be slow to answer. The hall closet will not do. In the hall closet you may well have a flag, as we do, in fact. Ours has a rattlesnake on it, and we show it on all festive days, Ground Hog Day included. But it is not *the* flag; it is *a* flag. Yours, too, is *a* flag. You can burn your flag, and you are even supposed to, by the way, when it gets too tattered and dirty, but you can't burn the flag. Although it is not, like Plato's, a universal and permanent idea, the flag is just that—an idea.

A flag is usually a piece of cloth with shapes and colors arranged upon it. But it can be other things as well. On this page, there is a flag. How big a crime do you feel you would be committing if you burned this page? How angry would you be if some exhibitionist scuzzbag were to burn this page because he noticed on it a flag?

A tree is something. Another tree is also something, and a lot of trees are a lot of trees. But the forest is an idea. True, we sometimes can not see the forest for the trees, but it is more often the other way around, and all we can see is the forest. This is what has happened when we think that Italians, by which we mean the Italians, are criminals, or when we think that the black people are not as devoted to family life as the white people. This is the root of a particularly dangerous confusion.

Unfortunately, there is great convenience of expression in the undisciplined use of "a" and "the." All of our readers should be thinking, just now, of the fact that this sheet often refers to the educationists. We are certainly thinking of it. And we are wondering what to do about it. That is, at least, the first step in the direction of mental clarity. We hope to take another step or two. One thing we already know to do, and do whenever we can, is to give names.

Those are tiny words, the articles “a” and “the,” and exceedingly common. It is not likely that their use causes many “mistakes” of the sort that composition teachers have to correct. But consider this: If you ask a man to go forth and die in defense of a flag, he either will, or most certainly should, laugh in your face. But if you ask the same in defense of the flag, he will usually go. And therein lies the worth, to someone, of the belief that the forest is more “real” than the trees.

### Brief Notes

WE have had several great letters about pi. Two of them pointed out that we were surely wrong in suggesting that you could prove for yourself that the diameter and the circumference were incommensurable. How right they were.

It has, of course, been proven, but the task took centuries and great minds. Our own “proof”—we really thought we had done it, we reexamined. That in itself was one hell of a job. It turned out to be bogus, since it depended on yet another incommensurable which we had unknowingly assumed—the diagonal of a square that might be drawn upon a bisection of the radius

One reader has suggested that we display in every issue our motto, the words of Ben Jonson printed below. He says this partly because he keeps forgetting it, and prefers not to, but also because it seems to express the theme of this journal. Well, maybe it does. It certainly comes closer than anything we can come up with. We’ll do it, starting right now.

#### THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN

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

Eight issues a Year. One year subscription:  
Persons in the USA or Canada, \$15US; Persons elsewhere, \$20; all non-personal entities of any sort, i.e., libraries, \$20—or 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 Thirteen, Number Six . . . October 1989



## Dies Irae in Academe

IN the school year that has just now begun, this nation will spend more than three hundred and fifty billion dollars on what it calls “education,” by which it means, of course, schooling. That comes to \$5,200 for each elementary school pupil, and almost \$15,000 for each high school student. Per pupil, that is far more than is spent in any of the many nations that do a much better job of schooling, that is, training people for useful and relatively harmless lives. It is also enough to build seven hundred stealth bombers. As to the meaning of that fact, however, we are uncertain. We just don’t know enough about the stealth bomber. It, too, for all we know, may be worse than useless.

These things we *do* know about our schools. If we are mistaken in any detail, whosoever can, may triumphantly rebuke us at the end of the school year. But that will not happen. This school year will bring us more illiterates than last year. More dropouts than last year. More unemployables than last year. More drug users than last year. More little girls with babies than last year. More little girls with drug addictions and babies than last year. More indigents than last year. More cynical opportunists, convinced that the life of the intellect is bunk. More deluded young athletes, skilled in nothing but their bodies. More apprentice hoodlums who can see in order and discipline nothing more than slavery. And all of that, of course, will serve to justify more strident demands for the expenditure of more money than last year in order to provide even more of all these things next year. As to whether seven hundred stealth bombers would do more or less harm than this, we have no way of knowing or finding out.

To dream of the reform of schooling is childish folly. We stand now, as we always stand, at the highest point, so far, of a continuously growing trash heap of “reform,” now more than seventy

years high. In every one of those years, the educationists of America have said, “Well, sure, there have been some mistakes, but now, ah now, we *really* know what to do.” (These people never say that someone has *committed* mistakes, but only that there may have been some.) In the coming year we will hear the same. Often. It is not just a mistake; it is madness. It is as though a man in whose brain a malignant tumor were growing should seek out every possible way in which it might somehow be converted into a better tumor, a more efficient tumor, a tumor of which to be proud.

American schooling is not sick; it is healthy. It waxes fatter and stronger every year. It gobbles more every year, and grows prodigiously. Millions and millions of people—indeed, all of the people associated with it, with the exception only of those who are forced into it by law—take enormous profit and comfort from it. It will, of course, perish, but only after long seasons of writhing and twitching, and by then it may well have killed its host.

Reforms in schooling are always responses to particulars, and, thereafter, responses to those responses, and so on forever. In the thirteen years that we have spent in watching, there has not been one change in principle, not one glimmer of hope that someone in that tangled mess might come to reconsider the ideas that make it what it is.

With the best of intentions, which they may even have, the reformers of schooling will stumble forever from details to details—into the open classroom and out of it, from board control to management control to parent control to teacher control, from student-centered education to outcomes-based education, from this set of basal readers to that, through all the revisions of the revisions of the standardized tests, and down that endless corridor of all those newer and newer maths. It is a hellish prospect for all but those who make their livings by it, and who would be put out of work should they ever succeed. That fact alone is enough to suggest the worthlessness of reform. Any machine, Thoreau noted, has its friction, and might run better with a little oil, but when friction comes to have its own machine, we should smash the thing.

Although there are millions of little reasons for the disaster of American government schooling, there is only one Big Reason. School is a

government agency with a political and ideological agenda. All that it does is meant to have its effect in what those educationists call the Affective Domain, which is to say, in the belly, in the gut of sentiment, feeling, and belief. Even when they do happen to teach a little arithmetic, they can think of no better reason for doing that than competing with the Japanese—in which they show that they can’t—or enhancing a little self-esteem here and there. They prefer “teaching” things like sex education or drug education, interminable programs of persuasion, cajolery, and Let’s Pretend role playing, in which twelve long years of repetitive preachment can be drawn out of a body of knowable fact that might even fill an eight-page pamphlet if there were a few pictures. To tell what is known is not enough; they are attitude police, they are the Sunday-school teachers of the civic church. But they fail. Children can see that they are reciting some party line, and they grow cynical, concluding at last that if much of what the teachers preach is cant, then maybe it’s all cant.

That is why school in America has no spirit, no energy. School is not at the center of anything; to all other institutions it is peripheral, an adjunct, a way station, a tool. It hums with no dynamo of its own, but rattles like a jury-rigged appurtenance. It is the home and dwelling place of nothing in particular, but an utterly unselective crash-pad for vagrant notions. It shines with no light of its own, dazzles with no glory, astounds with no wonder, surprises with no joy, sobers with no reverence, awes with no solemnity. It does not prize the intellect. It has no heart, no theme, no greatness.

How long must this go on? How many times must we ask, What can we do about the schools? Let us rather ask, Is there some way in which we could do without these schools? After all, if we were to close the whole operation down today, we would have more than three hundred and fifty billion dollars to play with. Not bad for seed money.

Just now there is noise in the press about the fact that American businesses can not find enough young people who are able to do any useful work. They can not even find enough young people who are at least sufficiently skilled in the most elementary powers of mind so that they might be worth training for some useful work. Thousands of jobs are unfilled. Corporations find sometimes

that one in seven applicants, and sometimes only one in ten, can be expected to do the relatively routine and undemanding work that underlies all corporate and industrial enterprise, the daily round of clerking and recording and counting. They can hardly find people who can write a little note or even talk intelligibly on the telephone.

The shortage is so great, especially in those jobs that seem more and more to be taken by young members of various minorities, that one Brad M. Butler, a retired chairman of Johnson & Johnson, foresees “the growth of a third world within our own country.” He fears, not unreasonably, that “some time in the twenty-first century this nation will cease to be a peaceful, prosperous democracy.” David Kearns, chairman of the Xerox Corporation, sees “the makings of a national disaster,” and other corporate chieftains of all sorts agree.

Most of them, of course, probably see nothing much more than corporate inconvenience, and the ever-present problem of competing with those pesky Japanese. But some of them, like Butler and Kearns, do seem to have higher, darker, visions. It is as though they see, and we think they do, that working for a living has a meaning above and beyond its practical consequences. It is a Way, a way of living, and it is good in itself. Should we go on raising up unto ourselves whole generations of people who can not live in that way, then we will not only destroy this land, but it will deserve destruction. Such a land would be a torment to itself and a deadly peril to all its neighbors.

And a strange new thought has been suggested to us. We don’t exactly like it, but it presses us. Academe is rubble now, and no spirit lives in it; Church has become a motley collection of wifty interest groups; the one King is broken into bureaucratic bits; Art whimpers for funding; and the Soldier sits at desks and pushes buttons. What humming dynamo would Adams hear in the shabby exposition hall of all our institutions? Can it be that very thing that we intellectuals are so proud to despise, the crass and trashy world of business?

So we have some advice for people like Butler and Kearns, who may well be more numerous in that world than we have supposed. Here it is: Stop wading near the shore holding on to a plank; jump into the deep. Don’t imagine that you can “help” the school people to give you what you need. Who

supps with the devil must bring a long spoon, and yours isn’t long enough. Do it all yourself. You have the dough, and, it begins to appear, the spirit.

You, Kearns, begin. Butler is retired. Speak thus to everybody at Xerox: Starting in September of 1990, the Xerox Corporation will provide all of its employees with a new fringe benefit—free schooling from grades 1 to 12 for all of the children of its employees, and day care and kindergarten too. Xerox schools will hire, and pay handsomely, the best damn teachers there are, and fire them, too, if they turn out not to be. They will, first and foremost, teach the children, all the children, to read and to write and to cipher. There is no mystery as to how to do that, but it will require both teachers and children to work hard, just as you do in your work at Xerox. The schools will teach languages and sciences and all sorts of technical skills. The children will study history by reading historians, and literature by reading good books. We will preach them no pap about values, but let them rather behold the whole range of what their fellow human beings have found valuable, and help them to consider why.

The boards of Xerox schools will be made up of Xerox people, and they will have the management of the schools. As to curriculum, however, they will, at most, advise and request. If the teachers can not decide what is worthy to be taught, and how, we will find better. We will, in any case, be offering them so much money that we will have hundreds of choices for every position.

Every student who completes the course of study will have a job at Xerox along with the diploma. In return for that guarantee, every parent must participate fully and actively in the business of schooling, and share, as parents should, the responsibility for the education of their children. Dropouts will be permanent. Decent and civilized behavior will be taken for granted. Homework will be done. The library will be quiet, and the bathrooms will be clean. No one will use drugs. Since we are deducting nothing from your salary to support the school, we will not be depriving you of anything that is rightly yours should your child be expelled.

These schools will be good. They will prepare our people for decent, thoughtful lives and productive work. Many details still remain to be worked out, but nothing in this is beyond the power of the human mind. Stay tuned.

One such school would start a revolution, weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Only a Hero would dare it. So now we will see if we must accept the world of business as the repository of vital energy and courage in a dark age.

### Nothing More To Say

Fathering is also one of the things I do without seeming to accomplish anything. My daughter—she’s only 12 to my 63, so *that* might explain a few things—is not turning out at all as I had hoped. I listen to classical music, she listens to noise; I read, she doesn’t. In the living room are shelves of books, but not once has she, out of simple curiosity, taken one down and flipped through it, much less perused it. I believe in the mind, she believes in makeup and hair spray. And let me suggest that there might be an alternative way to pass the time of day, and she looks at me with that mixture of surprise and surliness that might have invented the first philosopher. Accomplish anything? I seem powerless to accomplish anything. Why is this when I seem capable of reasoning? Why is this, when I try to keep my mind in tune?

WE find ourselves in Hell again, sent this time by a reader’s letter, some part of which is quoted above. We are in Limbo, which is, no matter what they say, still Hell. Here are the virtuous pagans, those who did the best they could by minding the Law as shown in Nature. They have no pain, but neither have they any hope of more than painlessness. They neither suffer nor rejoice.

Socrates is there, of course, along with Plato and Aristotle, and numerous other ancient luminaries of science and philosophy, but Dante, naturally, puts the poets first. He and Virgil are greeted by Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. We are told that the five great poets chat a bit, but, except for hearing that they have invited Dante to join their company, we are not told what they say. At least, though, they speak.

But the philosophers do not. Socrates looked forward to his death, supposing that, should there be more life after all, he would at last be freed of the delusions caused by the body and would be

able to hold high converse with other souls likewise free of the flesh, and also far more wise than he. There, he hoped, he would be able to find out the truth hidden behind the world of matter.

Dante has it otherwise. Here, the great minds are silent. No one speaks. Even Socrates has nothing more to say. We behold them for a moment, as in a *tableau vivant*, and travel on. Just down the road we come to the “place where nothing shines at all.”

We commend, and try to practice in these pages, the thoughtful life. And we “believe” in it, but we do have to say that with quotation marks. What we have in mind is not the believing that comes of guessing or hoping, but the believing that Plato spoke of when he put the scientists among the believers rather than among the knowers. It was, we believe (this time in the sense of guessing), Hobbes who pointed out that our “belief” in tomorrow’s sunrise is just that, a belief, an inference about non-existent phenomena drawn from our experience of other phenomena. As beliefs go, it’s good enough to bet on, but still a belief. And our belief as to the goodness of the thoughtful life is no better, and no worse, than our belief in tomorrow’s sunrise. We have the evidence of experience. Who will take thought, as reasonably and as clearly as possible, as to the meaning of deeds, will be happier and better for it.

It is thoughtfulness that promotes the cultivation of the Greek ideal—moderation in all things. It is out of thoughtfulness, and not out of sentiment, for instance, that we can discover and prefer courage not as an endowment or just another laudable sentiment, but as the reasonable middle ground between cowardice and recklessness. It is by taking thought that we can be consistently generous, that is, neither profligate nor niggardly. And it is when we understand that kindness lies not at one end of a line whose other end is cruelty, but just midway between cruelty and indulgence, that we can be kind by reason rather than by emotion.

That is why the practice of thoughtfulness must be always at the heart of anything that calls itself “education.” It is, of course, possible to be brave, and generous, and kind out of some “good feeling” or other, but feeling is a weak and undependable companion. All it takes to scare off one feeling is the arrival of another. Feelings are numberless, and, unlike thoughtful judgments,

they can give no reasonable account of themselves, nor do they care to. They are the unbidden guests at the table, the raccoons in the garbage can, and the rising water in the cellar.

And that is why such exercises as the programs of attitude adjustment now fashionable in our schools must fail. If we exhort the children to feel bad about drugs, and to feel good about people of other races, we may inculcate those feelings. Today. At the same time, however, we will demonstrate our belief in both the malleability and the primacy of feelings. Another day, another feeling.

A life governed by thoughtfulness—or, to be truthful, a life that has its brief seasons governed by thoughtfulness—is not without excitement. It brings, once in a while, refreshing wonders, and, more than once in a while, calmness. It is an answer to the proverbial prayer, which asks for the power to know the difference between the things that are in our power to change and those that are not. And that in itself is one of its wonders; it often leads us to discover that we can answer some of our prayers for ourselves, and even that some other of our prayers might better be left, not only unanswered, but even unprayed. But it is a life not only moderate, but middling. If it is not the crackling of thorns, it is also not the heat of the sun. And so it is that the philosophers can neither suffer nor rejoice. Maybe children can see that.

The philosophers, as instructed both by Socrates and by their own deliberations, will open the gates, and go out to greet the poets. They will wine them and dine them, and deck their brows with laurel, and then, courteously, bid them farewell, and go home, carefully closing the gates behind them. But the children would like to dance and sing with the poets, and perhaps even to run off in that immoderate company, over the hills and far away, leaving the gates to swing with the wind behind them. The children don't even care if the poets aren't really very good poets. They care only that there be poetry, and that there be singing and dancing. And they take no thought for the morrow, what they shall eat and drink, and what they shall put on, the sillies. And what are we to do? Must we always lose, and lose so big—sixty-three to twelve?

It may be so. Even Plato seemed to suspect, in old age, and Socrates clearly hints, early on in *The*

*Republic*, that the good life calls for dancing and singing and praising that one that he always called “the god.” Nor did either of those worthies, now fallen silent, deny that the poets, and all the artists, had been visited, maybe even victimized in a way, by the light, by the sun, the real sun. The poets in Limbo speak, and speak of excellent things.

A man who had been studying philosophy with Epictetus came to the master one day with a gloomy face.

“Listen, Epictetus,” he said, “I have to tell you that this philosophy stuff sounds very good when we talk about it, but, when the chips are down there on the bottom line, it doesn't work.”

“Goodness gracious,” said Epictetus, “that is very bad news indeed. What has brought you to say that?”

“Well, it's like this. I have to put up with this brother-in-law. He is an obnoxious and arrogant fellow who always thinks that he knows better, no matter what you tell him. He can't see any reason why he shouldn't have whatever he wants, which is exasperating enough in itself, but, even worse, he calls me a fool for suggesting that he ought to consider whether he *should* want what he wants. He has the trick of cleverness, which provides him with a sharp and ready smart-alec answer to everything that I tell him, and when I explain to him the fruits of our discussions here, he laughs and tells me to grow up and face facts and give some thought to buttering bread. I've tried everything that you have taught me, but he just won't improve. If philosophy can neither make people better than they are, *nor* butter bread, then the whole business is a waste of time. I'm quitting.”

“We'll miss you,” said Epictetus, “but, before you go, will help me to understand? Your brother-in-law has obviously not been made better by your urging upon him the deliberations that we call philosophy, but has he been made worse, do you think?”

“Worse? Him? Believe me, there's no way he could get worse!”

“Well, you must at least be grateful that you haven't done any harm in your failure to do good, but tell me, how about you? Have you been made better by all this hassling with him?”

“How could I be? After all, you can see for yourself that I'm mad as hell, and disappointed

too. I really had some hope for that philosophy stuff. If anything, this mess has made me worse.”

“Very interesting,” said Epictetus. “The mind that was in you was able to do no good for your unhappy brother-in-law, but the mind that was in him easily made you unhappy, and worse. Maybe philosophy stops at the skin. Within that boundary, as you yourself can testify, it can engender marvelous changes for the good. But, obviously, there is some dangerous, other power that goes right through the skin of him who has it and easily does its harmful work in others. I do wonder what it is.”

### Brief Notes

**H**ERE is a paragraph from “English As She’s Not Taught,” a piece by Jacques Barzun, first published in *The Atlantic* in December of 1953. Portentous?

“Writing is at the very least a knack, like drawing or being facile on the piano. Because everybody can speak and form letters, we mistakenly suppose that good, plain, simple writing is within everybody’s power. Would we say this of good, straightforward, accurate drawing? Would we say it of melodic sense and correct, fluent harmonizing at the keyboard? Surely not. We say these are ‘gifts.’ Well, so is writing, even the writing of a bread-and-butter note or a simple public notice; and this last suggests that something has happened within the last hundred years to change the relation of the written word to daily life.”

From there he goes on to consider what might be done in our time, when more and more of even the most routine business of life is done through passages of writing. To us, however, it seems that much of the rest of the piece might have been written by a man who hadn’t read that paragraph. Too cheerful.

Here at THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN we actually have an English teacher serving in a humble capacity on our staff. He can write pretty well when he is being paid to do it. How well he can write when he isn’t being paid, we don’t know, because he never writes anything when he

isn’t being paid. Crass chap, but he quotes Dr. Johnson in his defense, who pointed out that only a blockhead would write without pay.

Once in a while he actually teaches writing, for pay, but he readily admits that he has never taught anybody anything. (The students must be either blockheads, or, since they are writing under duress, slaves). Those who are good at the start of the course, are, at least, not worse at the end, but those who start out no damn good are ditto when the course is over. But the pay is not all that bad.

Here is a piece of writing that Barzun cites in his piece:

“The window have been cleaned Wed. 12:30 P. M. Your maid was their to veryfey the statement.”

Barzun deems it “perfectly clear and accurate.” So do we.

The window cleaner neither has nor needs the gift of writing, real writing. The same is true, we’re pretty sure, for the accountant, the chemist, the pilot, the seller of cosmetics, and perhaps even the teacher. The callings in which it is needed are very few, and few, as well, are their practitioners.

So, naturally, we have thousands of people teaching greater thousands of people, and by duress, how to do what they can not learn and what they will not need. Silly, maybe, but the pay is good.

### THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN

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

Eight issues a Year. One year subscription:  
Persons in the USA or Canada, \$15US; Per-  
sons elsewhere, \$20; all non-personal enti-  
ties of any sort, i.e., libraries, \$20—or 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 Thirteen, Number Seven . . . November 1989



## Come, Let Us Prey!

WHERE THE CARCASS lies, there the vultures will gather. The hyenas too, and the jackals. It's easy pickings, except for the occasional squabbles among the scavengers. But scavengers aren't really fighters, and no one gets hurt. All in all, it's not a bad life for the vultures and the hyenas and the jackals, who have even earned themselves, if not friendship, at least our thanks and admiration for the work they do—the removal of the putrid. It's a nasty job, but somebody has to do it. Better them than us, no?

And so, we do not know exactly what judgment to make of Richard Lipkowitz and Salvatore Stazzone, or of their whistle-blowing wired-for-sound pal Colman Genn. They are surely hard at work, and we have no doubt that they're great bunch of guys, but shall we thank and admire them for gnawing on the rancid remains of School District Twenty-seven, or is there another judgment that we ought to consider?

Colman Genn is the superintendent of that district. He must have found Jesus, or something. He started wearing a tape recorder in some inconspicuous place so that he might pass on some deliberations of the board, and other bits and pieces of juicy stuff from various related meetings and phone conversations, to the Gill Commission, whose official title is the Joint Commission on Integrity in the Public Schools. (A clear case of *ipso custodes*, we suspect, but that is a story we probably won't be able to tell for a while.)

The Commission found itself interested in the mighty cause of Values Teaching in the Schools when an audit turned up the fact that District Twenty-seven had spent, in just eight months, \$11,025 in what have been named, perhaps by a values teacher in the phone company, "specialty calls." (Specialty calls pronounced, we would guess, spe-shee-al-i-ty, are the calls that get you some dynamite chicks who will either breathe

heavily or listen to you breathing heavily, or some other such relating to self and/or others. It's, well, it's like a socialization or self-esteem enhancing hands-on exercise. Some of them, probably the best ones, cost thirty-five bucks for the first minute.)

There were other charges, too, in that period—\$20,880 dollars for directory assistance, possibly for board members and apparatchiks who are not all that familiar with alphabetical order, and another \$18,386 in late charges. Quality education does not come cheap.

Whether after some discussion of these matters, or for some other reason, Superintendent Genn agreed to go forth from the Commission hearing room wired for sound. Neat, eh? Sort of like Miami Vice, but better. Closer to home. Everybody, after all, can find a school board right here in town. And maybe everybody should, come the think of it.

Lipkowitz and Stazzone were two of the Educators of Queens taped by Genn. Stazzone is a member of the board, and Stazzone is a gym teacher. When Stazzone decided to put aside his own selfish concerns and work for the common good by serving the public and the children of Queens as a humble member of the school board, it was Gym Teacher Lipkowitz who sprang to the fore and gave unstintingly of his time and talent to organize Stazzone's campaign. Well, gym teachers probably do have a little time on their hands, but still, such public service does make you proud to be an American.

And it was Lipkowitz the Moderate and Genteel who said on the telephone to Colman Genn, "Let's take the whole store for years. But let's do it slowly, like gentlemen, and quietly." It's good to know that there are still some gentlemen left.

In another telephone conversation, this one with Stazzone, it was Lipkowitz the Ruminative and Theoretical who said, "I've never heard the word 'children' or 'education' enter into our discussion in the last few years."

"With anybody," Stazzone added, with a little laugh.

And then there's James C. Sullivan, another board member—the treasurer of same, in fact. Genn got him pointing out the he was "a political leader," whose job it was to make sure that his people got jobs. He trotted out his list, further commending his candidates over others by

pointing out that the district was hiring too many blacks and Jews.

Stazzone & Co., of course, have been at once paying off and establishing little political debts by hiring the right people to fill the numerous, hoked-up jobs that can easily be found—and, if absent, just as easily created—in any school district in the land. At one point in the tapes, Stazzone complains to Genn that his recommendations for paraprofessionals and teaching aids are being ignored by one Josephine Schwindt, District 27's deputy superintendent. Lipkowitz then suggests the he, Lipkowitz, and Stazzone come up with a new deputy superintendent and give Schwindt a little shove "sideways with dignity."

Now if you believe that there is one government agency in all of America in which such little deals are not cut every day, please send one hundred dollars for our list of hitherto unrevealed sayings of Nostradamus and baldness cures. We really have made the machine that Thoreau thought he had dreamed of only in metaphor—not the machine that must put up with its friction, but the machine whose very product is friction. It is just not the case that Stazzone & Co. are exploiters and spoilers. Education is a private and inward condition; schools run by governments are political contrivances. Education can be no more established by law than love or bravery, which may arise with or without the law, or even against it. But compulsory attendance and perpetual taxation can be enforced only by law, and law comes from politicians, and politicians got to be where they are by knowing how to take the whole store like gentlemen, and quietly. Sideways, with dignity.

At this writing, all board members in District 27 have been suspended. Gym teacher Lipkowitz is not answering his telephone, and Stazzone has an unlisted number. Sullivan says, "I have always acted in the best interest of children and parents. I'm confident I will be exonerated." Bernard Mecklowitz, who is the Chancellor of all this stuff in New York, has appointed three of his pals to take over the business of District 27, which has, after all, an annual budget of about ninety-six million dollars. The district attorney and the United States attorney have both taken an interest in the case.

It may be that Stazzone & Co. are in a little spot of trouble, having finally committed the one sin that politicians can't overlook—letting down the side.

But still, we can't help sort of liking those guys. They played the cards they had. We dealt them the cards. Just like the rest of us, they took care of their friends. One Lipkowitz is worth a hundred reformers any day. Just knowing about him will bring anyone to more thinking about the whole system, and the inevitability of politics in a political establishment. And, unlike many of the others who make their livings from the daily incarceration of millions of children, these men do not lie to themselves about what's going on. "We got a dirty district here," says Stazzone. He and his pals, and their counterparts everywhere, will perhaps not do, but surely bring about, more good than a whole convention of curriculum coordinators or a thousand Education Summits.

So we have decided what judgment to make of this great bunch of guys. They are OK. May their tribe increase. And you, just keep watching them all.

### The Just Counselor

In a government high school in New York, a student found a purse that held about a thousand dollars in cash. She turned it in to the lost and found. That, frankly, does not surprise us. It is a deed that is properly, and very instructively, to be called "natural." Had she kept both her counsel and the money, that, of course, would be called "only natural." The distinction apparently intended by that term is intriguing.

Somebody—who and why we do not know—went around asking a strange question, and found not one adult in the whole school who was willing to go out on a limb and say that such a deed ought to be called "virtuous." And one of the student's teachers said, "If I come from a position of what is right and wrong, then I am not their counselor."

THE lady quoted above made her appearance in this sheet somewhere back in 1987, in a piece called "Pilgrims Progressive." She came to mind

recently when we read a piece in the *New York Times* about Bill Bennett, who has moved from Education to drugs, which is not even on another floor but only just down the hall.

Where once, since parents must have been incapable of doing it, the school people had to teach children to blow their noses and tie their shoes, the school people now, obviously for the same reason, have to plant in the minds of the children the suspicion that drugs are not good for them. Accordingly, Bennett is just as interested in schools as he ever was, and always looking for ways in which the schools might strike a blow or two for Drugfree America. In fact, who can think it a bad idea?

So we would like to see some talk show host give an hour or two to a long heart-to-heart between Bennett and the lady schoolteacher quoted above. It goes something like this: Bennett tells her all about the drug mess, which is indeed as deadly and dangerous as it can be, and asks the lady to help by trying to convince her students not to do drugs. The lady replies, in perfect accordance of the great principles of modern educationism, and scrupulously avoiding any possible derogation of diversity, “If I come from a position of what is right and wrong, then I am not their counselor.”

Bennett, of course, and he is a big, strong man, might throttle her on the spot, for which no jury would convict, but he also might think of something to say to her. That’s what we’d like to hear. In fact, we’d like to hear Bennett, or anyone else, for that matter, say it aloud for all to hear.

Here’s what Bennett did say recently to a Senate committee. “All we ask of Hollywood—and it’s the same thing we ask of all the media—is tell the truth, tell the truth. Don’t lie, don’t overstate the damage, or the problem, or the risk.” He then went out to Hollywood and said the same. Sounds like good advice.

Now Hollywood, of course, is a far saner, stabler, and one might say, even a far decenter place than the world of educationism, but even there Bennett ran into an interesting form of resistance.

Hollywood likes celebrities just as much as the school people do. An all-pro linebacker on the screen cheers the heart of the producer just as a poster picture of Michael Jackson cheers the heart of the music teacher. So, while Hollywood is

happy to fight in the Great War on Drugs, it wants to fight as showbiz fights, with the big names and the familiar faces, stars of entertainment who *used* to use drugs, but who have, through brave determination against all odds, sort of like John Wayne, fought off the demon coke and returned to normal productive life either on the field or the sound stage. Bennett suspects, and he is right, that such displays are perhaps not the clearest and most useful statements possible about the life of the druggie. He would rather see a little more of what Hollywood hates as much as the schoolers hate, the dark side, the trash and the wreckage.

(He may also, of course, be thinking of the fact that some of those redeemed celebrities seem to find public confession so exciting that they manage to go through the whole cycle again. Or he may be, with us, wondering why it is that the drug treatment program funding enthusiasts never get around to mentioning the rates of cure achieved by drug treatment programs.)

Bennett’s unpleasant suggestion is here answered by one Larry Stewart, of the Entertainment Industries Council, who starts right out by clawing his way up to the high ground. “We are not much for negative reinforcement—we are for positive reinforcement. If Bennett would like to go from using some star to someone lying comatose from an O. D., we think that vitiates the first message.” In Hollywood, “vitate” is a pretty heavy word, which might best be left lying right where it is except by those who know how to pick it up. Stewart has pulled a groin muscle here by giving us the inducement to wonder exactly how that “first message” might in fact be vitiated by the not at all unrealistic portrayal of the comatose addict. And when we do that we can come to see what the first message really says. Yeah, drugs are pretty bad all right, but hey, look at me. I did it all, and here I am, back again, live and in person, in living color, right in your living room.

Well, that’s why they call it Tinsel Town. Bennett probably knew that he’d find little help out there, but we can hardly blame him for trying.

But that does mean that sooner or later he will have to go back to his old job, even without portfolio. Let’s face it—and we hate this thought as much as you do—in the drug mess the schools are just what Churchill called democracy, the worst possible system except for all the others.

There are more children held captive there than in any other place. And when Bennett gets back to the schools, there he will find the lady who won't come from a position of what is right and wrong because that would be to vitiate her role as a counselor, and might also get her into trouble with the enthusiasts of alternative life styles, one of which, of course, is hanging out in the park and shooting up, and brief but regular vacations with the easy marks running the treatment centers. So who is to say what's right and what's wrong?

Will there be searching of soul in the latitudinal lady and all of her like now that the schools have decided that, well, maybe at least in this one little matter of drugs, just maybe, that there is such a thing as goodness, and as badness as well? And will she now go forth among her students, explaining to them that she hates to come from a position of right and wrong, but we do have to be realistic, and that she has now *decided* to come from a position of right and wrong, at least as far as crack is concerned? And will her students blithely and gladly put the moral somnambulism of her past quite out of their minds, and heed now her stirring call to the good and examined life?

The best possible outcome of such a timely, convenient conversion would be the awakening of a question in the minds of the students: Was she being a hypocrite in her previous performance, when she so loftily taught us that right and wrong are variable and relative contrivances of the individual, or is she being a hypocrite now, when she wants us to believe the opposite so as to make life oh so much more pleasant and inexpensive for Society as a Whole?

Hypocrisy is the most transparent of vices, and even little children detect it. Her students will not trust that counselor of no values when she suddenly puts on values. They will wonder just what it is about a life with drugs that this pliable trimmer has decided now to come from a position of wrong. If these bland and neutral grown-ups are now trying to talk the young out of drugs, could it be that here, as in so many other cases, sex and booze, for instance, the tricky teachers are simply trying to protect a grown-up monopoly?

Fortunately, however, and this may be our only hope, the children didn't trust her in the past either. But the hope is slim; they have done their real work far better than they have taught any of their subjects. By now, she and her tribe have

managed to provide us with millions of children who passed from credulousness not, as would be best, into the skepticism that provokes inquiry, but into the cynicism that brings on nihilism. The young will give heed to no-thing, nothing that such counselors will tell them. That is exactly how we came to be where we are. Look around.

A teacher who does not care to distinguish between the better and the worse, between the worthy and the unworthy, between the beautiful and the ugly, between the just and the unjust, is the same thing to the body politic as the cop on the take or the judge whose verdicts are for sale. The twisted cops and judges, however, must at least be a little ashamed, for they try to keep hidden. Twisted teachers are proud; they boast.

### **Grammaticaller Than Thou**

Once they are fully appraised of the situation...

...they don't have to go to tim buck two to see something spectacular...

...you've peaked my curiosity...

...takes passengers on a 4-mile journey from the Cripple Creek Museum through the first two weeks of October.

I like he and his wife.

...made you and I a promise.

The most important part of your sexuality is that you and your husband discuss any concerns about sexual relations with your doctor.

No transactions are cancelled do to non-usage of Home Banking.

...less calories

Use liscensed contractors for work.

I'm glad it's her and not me that is expecting.

**SOME OF** you have been collecting bits and pieces like those shown above and making fun of them. Some of you have even decided to make fun of the way other people pronounce words. We can not understand why you would do such things, and we wish that you what rethink the meaning of what you do.

We wrote, years ago, about some boy who said "I aint seen no dog." Of him, we said little then, but will say more now. We say that, as far as we can tell from what he says, he is not a liar, not a

seducer, not a wheedler, not an evader, not a charlatan pretending to understanding that he does not have, and, to be complete, that he has given us no evidence whatsoever of badness. He is just a little boy who talks that way. And, furthermore, he talks well. Yes, *well*. He says exactly what he means to say, no more and no less. In his words, there is neither Vice nor Folly.

The charlatans and the liars, and all of their ilk, speak better than that boy, in the most trivial sense, but far, far worse in the only sense that matters.

Ask yourself Kant's question. What would our world be like if everyone did as that little boy did? What would your life be like if politicians and lawyers and bureaucrats and social change agents and columnists and lobbyists and all the rest of us always said right out, as best we could, exactly what we meant, no more and no less? And if we had such a world, how important would it be if your congressman's letter says "your" when it should say "you're," or if the grocery store advertises Turkey's, or if the man who announces the weather on television says "between you and I"? If such things truly pain you, you have remedy: don't read, don't buy, don't watch.

Some of the errors cited above are so trivial that they can only with passionate attentiveness be sighted at all. Are they worth such labor? Of such labor, what fruit can there be except the satisfaction of some deep need to be better than someone else, and not better in any important sense, but only better in the observation of convention. That's nice, but it is only a social grace; it is not a virtue. If we delight in it, let us not forget that so do the liars and charlatans.

### The Findings of Science

"Egad," exclaimed Watson, in dismay and consternation. "Not the Filthy weed again! Surely, Holmes, a man of your intelligence ought to know enough to accept the findings of science!"

"Do calm yourself, my dear fellow," Holmes replied mildly, setting a match to his freshly filled pipe. "I will most certainly accept the findings of science, and with alacrity, too, on that very day in which they are completed. In the meantime, I will just have to take my chances like everyone else."

**M**OST people are a little puzzled and dismayed when they discover that Plato deemed science not a way of knowing, but a way of believing. He thought it not unlike faith, the substance of things hoped for, and not unlike augury, the dream of understanding the permanent through scrutiny of the ephemeral. For us, of course, it is the answer of answers, and the only hope we have of finding yet another moon of Pluto, ending world hunger, growing hair on the bald, improving television reception in outlying provinces, discovering exactly how many sub-atomic particles there *really* are, and reducing cholesterol, if, of course, we really *should* reduce cholesterol, which we also hope to discover.

Well, who are we to say? Maybe science is knowing, maybe it's believing. No big deal. The important thing to remember is that it's really fun.

Look around at your friends. Watch them guzzling their decaffeinated coffee to lessen their chances of heart disease from some *x* down to some *y*. Tell them the latest findings of science, and watch them wriggle. Watch them gagging down apples, risking the dreaded alar, to bring down the cholesterol that they have inadvertently raised by drinking decaffeinated coffee, and sprinkling salt the while on their bran, mindful of this week's finding of science that the blood pressure of those who cut down on salt may actually go up, not down.

And watch, too, for the remarkably frequent appearance of the word "may" in the findings of science. Interesting.

In this matter, we can do no better than to quote the reassuring words of Eileen Kugler, who speaks for the Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, an outfit of some sort in Washington.

'That's the way science is. People will have to be willing to be flexible and realize the research changes, and some studies are better than others.'

Aha. There it is. We must learn to be flexible, as flexible as the findings of science. Ah and alas, life is short, art long, decision difficult, experiment perilous.

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



# The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Thirteen, Number Eight . . . December 1989



## Wholisticismisticness

WE HEAR about these kooks all the time. They were singing the same little jingle when we started this enterprise, thirteen long years ago, they are singing it now in the Great Age of Reform, and they will be singing it so long as a system of government schools shall last.

The lyrics never change. Too much mind stuff! Too much intellect. Too little feeling. Too little touching. Nothing in school for the cute little right hemisphere. Too much rote learning, and too little relating. Too little creativity, and... Well, you've heard it all.

For a while, these preachers called themselves "holistic." Then one of them misspelled the word, but the rest of them sort of liked it that way. So now they have become "wholistic."

The wholisticist of whom we have the most recent news is a certain Jack Canfield, who is the director of a den of wholisticists in Massachusetts. He went to talk at an exceptional children conference. (Those people just love to hear from such as wholisticists.) He said, "We somehow blind ourselves to the most important part of education," which has to do with love and acceptance "of the part of you that overeats, and doesn't get out of bed when the alarm goes off," and which will bring you "to accept the parts of other people who do these things." As to whether he overeats and sleeps through the alarm, Canfield says nothing, so we don't know whether he is pleading for some special consideration or just showing what a great and tolerant guy he is. All we can do is hope that somebody breaks into his car and steals all his Tiny Tim tapes and his autographed eight by ten photo of Leo Buscaglia. Where is all that crime in the streets when we need it?

Well, as old as it may be, it's an interesting complaint—the schools are doing too much for

the intellect and not nearly enough for the gut. So our world must be full of intellectuals, unfeeling, cold and inhuman, rigorously rational, and, of course, superbly well informed, able not only to name that ocean over there, but even to distinguish Horatius from Horatio and never to refer slightly to *the hoi polloi*, but always careful to refer slightly to *hoi polloi*, who must, come to think of it, and given all of that inordinate attention to the intellect, be uncommonly thin on the ground.

Well, maybe, but just the other day a member of our adjunct staff was chatting with a secretary at a nearby state mental institution. He noticed a typewritten list pinned to the bulletin board nearby. It was a Personal Bill of Rights. Who could resist reading such a thing? After all, we live in a time when more and more rights are being discovered and expounded every day, and, perhaps, just as the Founders intended. Surely the unnamed rights referred to in the Sixth Amendment are numberless, and it is probably much to our credit that ours is the first age of the Republic in which citizens have learned not only to Take the Fifth but also to Take the Sixth.

Now our chap is, like any good citizen, passionately interested in knowing his rights. He already knows his Rights, his Civil Rights, his Human Rights, and even three or four of his Legal Rights, but he had never even *heard* of his Personal Rights. So you can imagine how eagerly he put his nose to the bulletin board. And there he read—well, not all ten—but only the first two of his Personal Rights.

The first was the right to hold and express his own opinions. Wow. That's some great right. It may even be two rights, one to hold, and another to express. But he wondered—perhaps he's been working for us too long—exactly what would it *mean* to say that a person has the right to hold an opinion? If that's what "right" means, then we might also say that a person has the right to forget his own phone number or to prefer cold cereals to hot. That's the sort of proposition that is neither true nor false, but just meaningless. No government, no tyrant, not even the IRS, can forbid the forgetting of phone numbers or command the preference for hot cereal. Ditto for the holding of opinions. The idea of a right has nothing to do with such things. Why you obstinately persist in preferring the wrong kind of

cereal we have no idea, so we also have no idea as to how to put you right. But we do know that the only thing that can prevent you from holding a nonsensical opinion is the intellectual power to discover that your opinion is nonsense.

Now here arises a nifty question for these times: If we were to teach children how to discover whether their opinions made sense, would we be accused of depriving them of their Personal Right to hold any opinion whatsoever, however stupid it might be?

(We have no answer, but we will let you brood on these words from Wholisticist Canfield: “There isn’t a right or a wrong way to be in this world.” No, we don’t know exactly what he means either, but we smell something.)

Mulling all that over, the poor chap came to the Second Personal Right: the right to have yourself, *and* your opinions, always treated with respect.

We once had a president who made it big by saying things like that, telling us that he wanted an America in which everyone would be treated exactly as he wanted to be treated. The public applauded—and voted, too, which comes to the same thing—and, Mencken being dead, there was no one left to say out loud that some of our most celebrated presidents were rich in all those qualities that the morons will most admire.

It’s lucky for the High Justices that the Personal Bill of Rights remains, so far, no more than personal. We can easily imagine that case in which A, as permitted by the First Right, tells B exactly what he thinks of B’s work habits, or his haircut, or his treatment of his children, thus violating and outraging B’s right to be treated with respect, that is, just as B *wants* to be treated. Some hassle. We would dearly love to watch such a case unfolding, but we would bitterly hate to live in a land where it could.

Our poor chap gave it up at that, and walked away not even curious about his eight other Personal Rights. He was afraid, we suspect, that he might be offered the right to control his own body, which he has already brought into most lamentable condition precisely because of his failure to control it in the past. He didn’t want to mull that over.

Indeed, those Personal Rights must sound so familiar to you that you could probably come up with eight more of the same quality for yourselves. Here is one thing we could say of all

such entries: Gee, that’s nice. And sweet, and so, uh, so tolerant. And, uh, so, aha, Yes! so decent and humane.

And here is another thing we could say of them: Only a boob could accept this and let it pass without questioning.

And yet one more thing: If a school devotes any of its time to Canfield’s program of “drawing out the essential self” and diddling with “intuition, emotions and body,” that time will be stolen from the development of reflection and understanding through language, and that school will be in the business of making boobs. But that, of course, is the very business of a government school—the perpetual provision to the state of a generous supply of useful idiots who just don’t notice nonsense, and who do imagine that they should be treated exactly as they want to be treated, and who can walk about all of their lives untroubled by the utterly contradictory notions by which they live. Such folk make exactly the voters that politicians want, exactly the pigeons that television evangelists want, and exactly the citizens that any government on the face of the earth wants. And they are testimony not to a failure of the schools, but to their success.

We are not yet ready to hold that the detection of nonsense is the one and only whole and wholesome heart of true education, but we can surely say that there is something not only foolish but even vicious in one who would say that there can be education *without* that power. And when we hear herds of educationists mooing out their fears that the schools will somehow hurt children by paying too much attention to the intellect, the only dependable detector of nonsense, vicious seems so weak and wrong. The next time we look at them, we’re going to try “evil.” Stick around.

## Absent Voices

Matthew Lesko is the author of numerous books on how to use government information for profit, and something of a professional defender of bureaucracy. He thought he had a surefire winner last summer when he offered \$5,000 for the best “verifiable story about how a government bureaucrat helped you.” After all, he says, we’ve got 15 million bureaucrats. He plugged the contest on Pat Sajak’s TV show,

Larry King's radio show, C-Span, and numerous local talk shows. He has so far received one entry: A woman in the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance nominated her boss. Lesko just can't understand it.

Charles Oliver, *Reason*, February, 1990

The government I live under has been my enemy all of my active life. When it has not been engaged in silencing me, it has been engaged in robbing me. So far as I can recall I have never had any contact with it that was not an outrage on my dignity and an attack on my security.

Mencken

**S**PEAKING of Mencken, hardly anyone speaks of Mencken. He has been forgotten, but he hasn't been gone. Now there is a new book about Mencken that may bring him back to where he should be—in the hearts and minds of all of us.

The book, we are told, will try to tame the hairy beast a bit by suggesting that Mencken, like lots of other scoundrels who were disgracefully lacking in precognitive powers, was just a tad too appreciative of the doings of Hitler. Some there will be, of course, who will be grateful for that, so that they can simply discount Mencken and, with moral fervor on the high ground, urge the same upon others, but many there will be who will read some Mencken for the first time. Of those, some will actually weigh and consider his words, and the Republic, for a while, will stand stronger. But there is one great branch of the Republic in which Mencken will never be read and considered, and that is, of course, in that place where government has charged itself with the high and noble calling of adjusting the consent of the governed before they can develop those powers by which they might do that for themselves.

Imagine this: You are an eighth grade schoolteacher. You "teach" social graces and civility, under whatever name is in fashion. It used to be call Civics, or Social Studies, or even Guidance. Sometimes even Current Events was used to name such a process, for nothing is too silly for the schools. Well, whatever. There you are, teaching it.

There is in your class one of those banes of the teacher's life, an intelligent smartass. He doesn't dislike you; in fact he feels a little bit sorry for

you. But that doesn't dissuade him from the occasional challenge.

He comes to class today with scraps of paper, given to him, doubtless, by an enemy of the people. And in that wonderful freewheeling open round table of rapping and relating that your class has become, he presents to you and all the epigraphs above, asking, Well, teach, what are we to make of such as this?

Now if you are in fact a teacher, as well as a position-holder in a government job, you will (secretly, of course, but reverently) send up a prayer of thanks. Some angel of light, perhaps, or maybe the goddess Athene herself, has looked upon you and yours in love and mercy today. If you are the usual hack, you can recite a few slogans about the greatest good for the greatest number and the nattering nabobs of negativism and everybody's right—government job-holders not excluded—to be treated as he wants to be treated. But let us be kind and assume that you are a teacher and not an educationist.

Think thus. Everything these children have ever heard or will hear in school about what government is for and how it works has been concocted in committee through compromise and conciliation. They have never heard, and will probably never hear, One Voice, the voice of One Mind thinking. They hear only the real Big Brother of our time, the bland and gutless unperson of Society as a Whole. And they know that. Never forget that they know that, and never expect them to want to hear what you have to say, for they have already included you among the gutless who will always say what is expected. That is why they are so hypnotized by the crazy and extravagant. Their ugly music, which isn't really shocking but only tormented and grotesque, has at least the promise of providing what is lacking in almost every part of their lives—the noteworthy unexpected. In school, everything is just what they expect, and worth no notice.

The longing for the unexpected is only in small part a frivolous thirst for novelty. It comes from that dream, which by nature they dream, that somewhere in the great, gray expanse of the wall along which they wander, with all the rest of us every day, somewhere there may be one little crack. You, the teacher, you know that there are lots of cracks in the wall, and even some holes just big enough to climb through into a better

land. And a Mencken, any Mencken at all, is a gate, a wide open gate.

But don't say that. Until they can find that out for themselves, no exhortation will avail. And don't argue Mencken's case for him. That's not your job. Consider the popular party-line complaint: The children are not up on issues and current events. They don't pay enough attention to Tom Brokaw, and they are uninformed as to the fate of Ceausescu and the failure of sanctions in South Africa. They do not give the tiniest damn about the deficit. If you will remember why this is so, you will give some thought to joining them.

The experts and commentators who tell us how to understand all such things are absolutely predictable. They will have either a firm grasp on the obvious or a slogan-song to sing. Often, the two are the same. Why would anyone in his right mind want to watch the televised in-depth discussion of the crisis in Latin America, or anything else, in which the standard-issue liberal and the standard-issue conservative get paid for wasting thirty minutes of our lives by interrupting each other with standard-issue assertions? If the children prefer ghastly videos and purple hair to yet another talk-show gathering of militant lesbian nuns or another lament about the ozone layer, can that really be because they fail to understand something that we do understand, or for some other reason?

So admit it. You already know what the militant lesbian nuns and the ozone experts will say, just as clearly as you already know what Henry Kissinger and Jesse Jackson will say. About anything. If you still think it your civic duty to "keep informed" as to the notions of all such folk, that's your problem. Don't visit it on your students. Bring them to consider not what Mencken says, but the fact that he says it, and that there doesn't seem to be anyone else around who will say things like that. If they would like to consider and test what he says, and out of more evidence than what is given on the first scrap of paper, that's good, but they will have to go out into the world and look around for that evidence. With that, you can help them.

They will not have to go very far out into the world, however. They sit right now in the precincts of the largest of all the government bureaucracies. Never forget that, from their point of view, you are just another bureaucrat, and some

of them may well grow up not only to agree with Mencken on the silencing and the robbing, but to add also the more serious charge of stultifying. If you are not one of those bureaucrats, if you are, like most of the best teachers, a true subversive surviving only because of the Byzantine disorder of the system, you will have to prove that to your students. They won't take your word for it; you will have to show them. You don't have to argue Mencken's case either way, but if you dismiss him as a self-indulgent and anti-social grouch, who never did relate well to others, you will show them one thing; if you take his words as a troubling provocation to thoughtfulness, some of the students will begin to suspect that maybe you are not really one of "them" after all.

Be sure of this. Even the worst reader in your class can "read" the difference between Mencken and the emasculated twerp who speaks from the pages of the government-issue text book out of which you are supposed to teach them. Of those two "authors," one is a crack in the wall, the other is the wall. That, any student can "read." One of them is bowing low to a master, the other is standing up. Can you possibly have a student who can't tell which is which? No way.

There is an even more important difference. One of them is everywhere in the lives of your students. His words are in all the books, in all the bulletins and memos, even on the billboards and the public "service" plugs on television. His monotonous voice oozes from all the principals and guidance counselors and curriculum coordinators, from the loudspeakers on the wall, from parents, preachers, politicians, and pundits, and, yes, dammit, even from you. We all do it. It's the easy way.

But Mencken's voice is missing. If it should break forth in your classroom today, it will be by accident, an unexpected and unexpected blow of fortune, for good or ill. That fact alone presents the possibility that this Mencken, of whom your students have never heard, might be simply right in what he says, and that his government, which does own and operate your school, has indeed silenced him. If that is so, then his charge of robbery might be interesting to consider. But let the students figure that out for themselves.

Mencken is not sweet. He is rude. He is intolerant. He calls fools, fools, and knaves, knaves. And worse. He calls the greedy, greedy,

and the shiftless, shiftless. He cares not a damn for the pleas of those who would excuse themselves as victims of Society as a Whole, whether poor or rich, weak or powerful. He respects no office, no dogma, no reputation. We have only a few like him, but all of their voices are absent from your “social studies.”

There actually are such things as legitimate social studies. They address such questions as these: How do we live together? How *should* we live together? Is it possible at all that we might live together in decency and justice?

So when your students study these social studies, where is Voltaire? Is he to be left to the French department and restricted to the two or three students in fourth-year French who can make out a little of what he says? Where is Sophocles, who will never show up in any of your departments, unless some trendy revisionist decides that one of his plays, at least, was really about the liberation of women? Where are Mill and Marx? Where, for that matter, are Milton and Madison? Where is...? Where is...? The list is very long. They are all the prophets who live alone in the hills that surround us, of whom we say we are proud, but to whom we do not listen.

The question before you and your students is a very old one indeed: How, then, shall we live? Great minds beyond counting have pondered it. No great mind, in fact, has ignored it. It is not just a question; it is The Question.

Education is an assault. It is a fierce beast broken into the fold. All the other stuff, the stuff they dream of doing in the schools, is really a domestication, a taming, a housebreaking. Education is a breaker of forms and habits. It is the very opposite of what schools intend and require the students to expect, nothing more than a confirmation, a consolidation of what he is already, but more so, and more securely so, a life with all his notions, attributes, and desires intact, and more money. Everything reinforced, and nothing overturned or destroyed. We speak much of growth and development, but never a word of renewal. Some still speak of “building character,” but never of clearing the land for the building.

And a Mencken in school is a fire in the rubbish heap. So are they all, all the missing voices. Incendiaries. Pyromaniacs. They love the flame, and the roaring crash of rotten timbers. And they would watch smiling the going up in smoke of pet

notions and beliefs, and the shriveling into ash of that long and remarkably convenient list of politically sanctioned attitudes and awarenesses planted in your students from infancy by a mindless but effective league of lazy parents, thoughtless teachers, political hustlers, and fifteen million bustling bureaucrats.

## Brief Notes

SOON, very soon now, Central Control will mount an expedition into the basement. There, or, more accurately, here and there, she will paw through many old and unlabeled cardboard cartons in search of back issues. If she finds those numbers that have been requested by readers, she’ll send them; if she doesn’t, she’ll try again a little later. It’s our form of lottery. Be hopeful.

THIS issue brings to an end our thirteenth year of publication. We would like to count up our achievements, but all we can point to without fear of contradiction is a big mess of boxes. *Nil*, nevertheless, *desperandum*. We go on.

ON page 4, you will have noticed an epigraph from *Reason*. *Reason* is a magazine published by the Reason Foundation in Santa Monica, CA. Its editor was, for a long time, Robert Poole, who is also one of its founders. He is known to us as a fine and thoughtful gent. He has now become the publisher, and has passed on the editor’s job to Virginia Postrel. If there were a son in this family, we would like him to marry Virginia Postrel, but there isn’t, and she is probably married anyway. So much for that. But we can still read her.

*Reason* calls itself a libertarian journal. We don’t know exactly what that means, and we do have some misgivings about libertarianism, the first of which is our reluctance to approve anything that ends in -ism. Furthermore, while the editorial policy of *Reason* is one thing, its ads are another. More than enough of them give the impression that libertarians are inordinately interested in their liberty to squirrel away precious metals and detect radar.

Nevertheless, we do like the sheet. It is in fact about liberty, which is, in our way of thinking, the fruit of education. And we are now particularly delighted by the thinking of Virginia Postrel.

She writes in every issue on, well, on civility. She comments on how we live, and what it seems to mean. Her mind is in tune, and her reason is in frame. She writes in the issue now before us (Feb, 1990) on the meaning of decadence in an age “when the law determines vice and virtue, [and] when everybody competes to determine the law.” She makes sense and provokes reflection.

There are, of course, many other good things in *Reason*. One of them is a regular feature page called “Brickbats.” The epigraph on page 4 is one of this month’s brickbats, and typical. They are to laugh, of course, but also to cry, and curse, and sometimes despair.

Since *Reason* once in a while reprints a piece from this sheet—one more fact in its favor—we are freeloaders, but the regular subscribers pay twenty-four dollars a year. The address for subscriptions is Box 3742, Escondido, CA 92025. Some of you might like it. And many of you will probably discover that it can help you to squirrel away something more precious than metal, and to detect something more dangerous than radar.

THE UNDERGROUND  
GRAMMARIAN

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

Eight issues a Year. One year subscription:  
Persons in the USA or Canada, \$15US; Per-  
sons elsewhere, \$20; all non-personal enti-  
ties of any sort, i.e., libraries, \$20—or more.

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



This is a

# SHARETEXT™

**Thanks for downloading this SHARETEXT:**

**VOLUME THIRTEEN: *THE UNDERGROUND GRAMMARIAN.***

**Please note the following:**

- This text is available FREE as html on the web. ShareText fees are only designed to cover formatting and Web maintenance. All text is public domain, and you have the option of copying the html text and formatting your own documents.
- By downloading and keeping this PDF document, you agree to send the nominal ShareText fee of \$3.00 to:

Mark Alexander  
P. O. Box 5286  
Auburn, CA 95604

- When you pay the ShareText fee, you can make hard-copies of this PDF document, and distribute them freely.
- If you choose to send the electronic PDF file of this document to others, or make it available on another Web site, please keep this page with the document and encourage others to pay the ShareText fee.
- All funds help to maintain all SOURCETEXT.COM Web sites.

Thank you for your support of *The Underground Grammarian.*

Copyright © 2000 by Mark Alexander. All Rights Reserved. SOURCETEXT, SOURCETEXT.COM, SHARETEXT, THE SHAKESPEARE AUTHORSHIP SOURCEBOOK, THE SHAKESPEARE LAW LIBRARY, THE HU PAGE, THE SCHOOL OF PYTHAGORAS and others are trademarked 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000 by Mark Alexander, P. O. Box 620008, Woodside, CA 94062-0008.