The Literacy Crisis: A Challenge How? [1]

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When Robert Benchley, some years back, was doing "Talk of the Town" for The New Yorker, he happened, as will happen, to fill in a glancing reference he was making to Mozart's musical precosity by saying that the composer had written his first music at the age of 3. To judge from the outraged letter of rebuke that the president of The New York Mozart Society sent Benchley, it was the sort of chance the man had spent most of his life waiting for. He marshalled his evidence as though he were moving a phalanx. First, of course, came the Authorities, the hallowed and hyphenated names, then the rumble of quotations in several languages, followed by the clattering clean up of supplementary bibliographical references--the whole of which proved unequivocally, undeniably, and absolutely that Mozart's first musical composition had not been written until he was 5. The tone of the president's valediction in the letter, delivered as though from a knoll, was predictable. One would have thought that at least with The New Yorker, at least with a man of Benchley's prestige and pretentions to sophistication, and on and on. In his next column Benchley printed the letter and then he himself began the scholarship game: the citations of authenticating correspondence, transcripts of conversations, holograph musical scores offered in evidence, unimpeachable personal testimony--all documenting beyond question that Mozart had indeed written music at the age of 3 just as Benchley had originally claimed--that is his Mozart had, one Sam Mozart of 196th Street, New York City, New York. The only possible explanation of the confusion here so far as he could see, Benchley concluded by saying, was that the president of the Mozart Society must have had some other Mozart in mind. And how was he, Benchley, to have known there were two.

For a Mozart which had been bled of life and music, a name become a label, made the instrument of meanness, Benchley returned a Mozart transcendent, the composer recomposed as the composer plus. Much of the talk of the literacy crisis confronting teachers of writing, I would argue, is analagous to what Benchley found himself facing with that president's letter. And, I want to suggest, I think we as he did can do better in the face of the prevailing criticism than feeling obliged to come up with an apology, a hand grenade, or a small traveling bag.

There's not much question that there's an issue, though the problem, or rather the problems, are another thing again. The Newsweek article published in 1976, "Why Johnny Can't Write," certainly the most highly publicized instance of the current consumer revolt, is a case in point. The argument is familiar; the details may be filled in: the decline of verbal aptitudes across the board across the nation, inadequate grounding in something called the basics, the creeping cancer of television, reading comprehension plummeting, standards acrumble, bad news from Berkeley, things gone to hell in Georgia, at Michigan State, Temple frantic, even Harvard gravely concerned--in the face of which of course, the sacred cows--namely the professional societies, the Universities, the public school systems--are said to be monumentally indifferent. Sacred cows with crumpled horns who in the placid, cud-chewing way--the follow-up pieces have been legion--simply refuse to kick the dog into worrying the cat to

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kill the rat that's eating the malt that lies in the house that Westing built. Nothing less than the culture, or more pregnantly, in Newsweekese, "a culture's ideas, values, and goals," is said to be at stake. Which is to say that IBM are not amused. Hence, "literacy crisis"--the label was as inevitable as it is ironically appropriate--on the analogy of "energy crisis" or the sort of thing that seems to happen periodically with rivers or in the Middle-East, that which calls for sandbags, or guns, or Quick Henry the Flit Kissinger, or more money for the oil companies: a clear emergency for which the remedy is no less clear. Graveyard talk really. What D. H. Lawrence would have called a vast post-mortem effect. Indeed, the huzzeri that has been raised over the issue has obscured the way in which approaches like that of the Newsweek article to what it calls "the literacy crisis" are themselves an example of illiteracy, displaying as they do a blindness to the implications of certain ways of using language that are rooted in either an ignorance of or an indifference to what language is, how it functions, why it is important. The Newsweek analysis, self-styled, of the problem, from another point of view is part of it--a generalization I would extend, by the way, to a great many of the counter-charges against the Newsweek piece that make the mistake of accepting Newsweek's definitions--which is how Richard Ohmann among others at what I would call rock bottom can argue as he did in The Chronicle of Higher Education that we really don't have a problem, a suggestion not that the emperor has no clothes, but that there isn't any emperor. There's a confusion here I think, but it's precisely in this confusion that I see the challenge for us as teachers. The challenge and the chance.

The real trouble with the Newsweek piece, the reason I began by sketching some of the meaner implications of it as a way of talking, is that though the article is not concerned with literacy as a concept, not really, does not in fact deal with the issue of literacy at all, it raises the issue in such a way as to create the illusion that it is dealing with literacy, and as a problem, and as a problem to which the solution is easy because it is so mechanically simple. What Newsweek means by literacy is mechanical correctness, knowing the four rules for the comma and how to apply them, being able to spell acceptably, and so forth. What it means by writing is communication, a matter of product rather than process, the simple mechanical transfer of information, which students can be trained to manage in the same way they can be taught to use adding machines or learn to pour concrete. Hence the activity of writing is totally covered by the use of a term like skill. Writing itself is a tool. Or just a tool.

Given such definitions, of course the solution to the problem is simple. The kind of illiteracy being referred to by Newsweek, an inability to manipulate what the NCTE has called the conventions of edited American English, exists in high schools and at universities because it is tolerated, indeed because it is countenanced. Not for some other reason. Or reasons. We do not, after all, certify accountants who are unable to add or subtract. Failure to understand this, by the way, I think is the main reason that so many of the standard solutions to even the most simplistic definitions of illiteracy--making it synonymous with incorrectness--have worked so badly. A heightened emphasis on what are called "basics" (by which is meant drill in the diagramming of sentences, improving

vocabulary, etc.), the use of teaching machines, even requiring students to take more and still more composition courses--all of these are solutions mentioned by Newsweek and all of them are seemingly reasonable--particularly when they receive the explicit endorsement of organizations such as the MLA. "Whereas college students throughout the country," intones that hoary old mother in her Newsletter of spring a year ago, "exhibit a marked lack of competence in writing, be it resolved that the Modern Language Association recommend the reinstatement of the freshman composition requirement in colleges and universities that had dropped the requirement." Etcetera. Etcetera. But at the level of practice such solutions have the effect of perpetuating precisely the sort of slovenliness they are designed to eliminate, because they all depend upon making literacy--even the simple-minded form of it--the responsibility of a Department, an English Department, a Humanities Department, a Speech Department, some single Department--which is to place the problem in just the kind of academic vacuum that will free a faculty at large, an administration at large, the students at large, and the public at large from having themselves to behave as though they believed correctness were important enough to be worth standing for. For everybody, the problem of correctness, like the hell of Ezra Pound, conveniently becomes someone else's. Hence graduate schools blame the universities, who in turn blame the high schools, who point back to the grammar schools from which we then move to the home, the culture, the zeitgeist--and then what? Fallout? Sunspots? Thus Newsweek's solutions even to the problem of what it is calling the problem of literacy--the same snaky circularity is at the bottom of most of them--buy a sense of Virtue in much the same way the White power structure sought to imagine it was opening the world to Blacks by building Stuyvesant Village. Most of the time a sense of virtue is the most that such solutions buy.

Still, I would maintain that the solution to the problem of correctness is simple. My standard response to someone who is objecting, say, to bad spelling, with the question of why we don't teach 'em how to write over there in the English Department is: "Why do you make our job so much more difficult than it would have to be by accepting or tolerating what you have a responsibility to refuse to accept, to refuse to tolerate?" I do not say, I said to the Board of Trustees of the University of Pittsburgh in explaining why there is no required course in composition at the university, I do not say that a Professor of Sociology or a member of the faculty of the Law School must him or herself know how to teach a student to improve her ability to write. That is the province of the English Department. But at the level of what is conventionally acceptable, a person does not have to be a carpenter to know a shaky table or to find fault with it for not being stable; and such teachers--the generalization might easily be opened to include the public at large--can put students in a position to recognize the importance of courses in composition to their development, in any event by refusing to read what is not correct, and by penalizing, I mean by failing if they have to, students who will not deal with a deficiency it has to be up to them to remove in the first place. Of course the solution to the problem of correctness would be simple--if anyone gave much of a damn about it--Newsweek's crisis can't notwithstanding. The solution would be as simple as it is in fact impossible.

Thus far I have taken some care, you will notice, to distinguish between what Newsweek calls literacy and what I would call literacy, between what the general public seems to understand by the term and what we understand by it--or what I think we should understand by it. What is this other literacy (our meaning versus theirs), the quality I see the Newsweek piece ironically so deficient in, the quality that I think a certain attention to correctness can retard if not make impossible the growth of, the quality I have referred to negatively as involving an ignorance of or indifference to what language is, how it functions,

why it is important? For I do believe there is a problem with literacy in the United States, a problem far deeper and more complicated than the rhetoric of "crisis" would have us understand. I think I can describe this problem best by means of an example, a negative example, but one that suggests a positive direction for us as teachers.

Not so long ago, close to ten thousand students elected to take the Advanced Placement Test in English, a test devised by the Educational Testing Service to provide an opportunity for those students already admitted to college to demonstrate a particular competence in certain subjects, to show, that is, not simply ability, but excellence. One section of this three hour test, a section designed to examine the students' ability to analyze a prose passage, had the following as its center.

> "Who is James K. Polk?" The Whigs promptly began campaigning on that derision, and there were Democrats who repeated it with sick concern. The question eventually got an unequivocal answer. Polk had come up the ladder, he was an orthodox party Democrat. He had been Jackson's mouthpiece and floor leader in the House of Representatives, had managed the anti-Bank legislation, had risen to the Speakership, had been governor of Tennessee. But sometimes the belt line shapes an instrument of use and precision. Polk's mind was rigid, narrow, obstinate, far from first-rate. He sincerely believed that only Democrats were truly American, Whigs being either the dupes or the pensioners of England--more, that not only wisdom and patriotism were Democratic monopolies but honor and breeding as well. "Although a Whig he seems a gentleman" is a not uncommon characterization in his diary. He was pompous, suspicious, and secretive; he had no humor; he could be vindictive; and he saw spooks and villains. He was a representative Southern politician of the second or intermediate period (which expired with his Presidency), when the decline but not the disintegration had begun.
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> But if his mind was narrow it was also powerful and he had guts. If he was orthodox, his integrity was absolute and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel. No one bluffed him, no one moved him with direct or oblique pressure. Furthermore, he knew how to get things done, which is the first necessity of government, and he knew what he wanted done, which is the second. He came into office with clear ideas and a fixed determination and he was to stand by them through as strenuous an administration as any before Lincoln's. Congress had governed the United States for eight years before him. But Polk was to govern the United States from 1845 to 1849. He was to be the only "strong" President between Jackson and Lincoln. He was to fix the mold for the future in America down to 1860, and therefore for a long time afterward. That is who James K. Polk was.

That passage is from an essay by Bernard DeVoto. It is out of context, and as an example of DeVoto's ability as a writer or of his assumptions about government, misrepresentative. But this does not exonerate the passage from an essential dishonesty, from the charge of pretending to an impartiality and objectivity that never amounts to anything more than a gesture. In fact, for all of its journalistic skill, the passage is a good working definition of what I would call illiteracy, the failure of a writer to be responsible to the implications of his language--whether consciously or unconsciously is irrelevant.

The voice which speaks in the passage, for example, is not a voice which is positive so much as it is one trying to sound positive. Note its aggressive, self-defensive tone. This is particularly obvious in the staccato punching of the last few sentences, so notably lacking in any examples of just exactly what James K. Polk's accomplishments were, and in the belligerence of the final, "That is who James K. Polk was." What does one do with those uneasy quotation marks around "strong"; and how explain the jarringly self-conscious

introduction of such honorific slang as "he had guts," and "no one bluffed him" or the Babbittlike praise of "powerful," "his integrity was absolute," "he could not be scared," and so forth? The grassroots America language is a good indication of what DeVoto's sentences are appealing to and on what level, and cannot be explained away simply as racy popularization. The passage is playing upon the most unsophisticated of American prejudices: that energy, strength, and forcefulness are good in themselves because they are ends in themselves. That a man knows "how to get things done" and what he wants done (called the first and second necessities of government!) here overrides the question of the value of what gets done and smothers the possibility that the means may not always justify the ends. That a man "has guts" neutralizes, even discounts, the narrowness of his mind--and this in a sentence the form of which suggests a distinction is being made. A similar bit of smuggling goes on in: "If he was orthodox, his integrity was absolute and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel," whereby a moral vocabulary is given the appearance of having a moral syntax. Is "integrity" the equivalent of not being "scared"? "Integrity" in that sentence is a trick, a word not that the subject demands but that the writer wants in order to play upon the common notion that integrity automatically means Virtue, is a Good Thing. Finally, the image of Polk's wresting control from Congress and governing the United States alone for four years (seen cozily in the company of Jackson and Lincoln), together with the implication that it was not only in spite of but because of his "limitations" that Polk succeeded as President, points up the entire first paragraph as mere rhetoric in the worst sense of the word, a smoke screen, the language of someone more concerned with appearing than being fair. Prune the passage of its proper nouns and what sort of person is defined by it? How much of the passage would have to be changed to have it apply to Adolf Hitler?

Since the DeVoto passage was chosen for the purpose of testing students' ability to analyze prose, the questions asked about it did not depend on how much the students knew about James K. Polk and were not concerned with whether or not they agreed with DeVoto's estimation of him. Of the several questions asked about the passage, in other words, not one was clearly designed to take the students into the propagandistic nature of DeVoto's prose, let alone into the way language shapes the world of experience--another instance of what I would call illiteracy.

However, an ambiguity in one of the test questions ("Is the passage generally favorable or unfavorable to James K. Polk?") led well above 80% of the students to comment on what they thought of the conception of a United States president offered by the passage, and 94% of this 80% read the passage as being generally favorable to Polk in the sense of approving of the conception of a president offered by it. The following examples of student responses are representative, the illiteracy of which, even at this remove, still has the power to make the bood run cold:

> 1. Because Polk took over Congress and cut through the red tape of legislation which had hamstrung the presidents before him, he was a great man. It takes a strong man to be a great one, and Polk was strong enough to know how to get what he wanted.
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> 2. When it comes to government, it's not a man's personality that counts but what he does. Polk got things done any way he could. In spite of his faults, he was strong and efficient, a fine President.
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> 3. Polk was prejudiced yes, but he was "sincerely" prejudiced and believed what he was doing was right. That's what America needed in a president and that's what it got.
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> 4. Anyone who can "fix the mold of the future in America" is certainly presented

> favorably. Polk had his faults yes, but he made a name for himself. The faults don't matter when you think of what he accomplished.-

There are several things to be noted about such responses, the most obvious of which is the utter unconsciousness on the parts of the writers of them of the implications of DeVoto's point of view. Not for any of the students is there anything strange or objectionable in someone's conceiving of a totalitarian leader as a hero, or in the open admiration of this conception as an ideal. Indeed, the majority of students went even beyond DeVoto, the substance of whose praise of Polk is mainly a matter of drift and innuendo. Second, I want to be sure to emphasize that the examples I have given are by no means the utterances of a crackpot few. They are absolutely representative and they became for those of us who were reading the examinations absolutely predictable. The answers were not all so pointed of course, but with unfailing regularity the bland equations of strength with goodness, of force with greatness, of the efficient with the benign appeared on paper after paper. In fact, so unusual was it for a student to recognize that what DeVoto is saying amounts to praising authoritarianism, to recognize that any exception might be taken to the values exhibited by the passage (the best the students could do with DeVoto's language was to object to some of his phraseology as "slangy" or "in bad taste" without giving any indication of what might be wrong with either or what this wrongness could lead to, and frighteningly enough the closest equivalent to the term "propaganda" was the word "clever")--so unusual was it for a student to take exception to the values of the passage, that when such a paper was discovered by the readers of the examination it was read aloud. I do not remember more than ten papers being read--this out of almost ten thousand examinations. And finally, I think it important to point out that however morally illiterate such remarks may appear, they are not the remarks of stupid or uneducated people. The students who wrote them know how to put sentences together; they come close to knowing how to read--particularly in Newsweek's terms. What they don't know is how to evaluate what they read, how to see it in terms of who they are and other things they know, how to test on their pulses the real assumptions beneath the ostensible ones. Most of the students, I suppose, would have been ready to condemn totalitarianism if they had seen it. The problem is to get them to recognize it when they see it.

It is true that the students were under pressure and said not what they thought, but what they thought they ought to say, what they thought their examiners wanted to hear. But is this not even worse?--not simply because it implies that one of the reasons the good student is a good student is that he has learned to feed back "right" answers, but because in this case the "good" student assumes that the "right" answer, the one wanted by his or her teachers, is one that splits public and private life, condones power as an end in itself, supports the doctrine that might is right, endorses efficiency as the ne plus ultra of government, and represents the politically expedient as not only morally justifiable, but necessary. The "right" answer here, in short, on the part of over three-quarters of the best students our high schools and preparatory schools are producing--is authoritarianism.

Such an analysis I have no doubt would horrify the writers of the majority responses enumerated above. "But this is an English test" one can imagine their saying, or "I'm talking about language not politics." And of course that is just the trouble. The responses were partial, written in a vacuum by people who never imagined that language involved more than getting commas in the right places or building a strong vocabulary. The responses are divorced from history, divorced from government, divorced most of all from the students themselves. Because they make no attempt to connect

various areas of their experience, to see Spinoza, the sound of the typewriter, and the smell of cooking as having anything to do with each other (of which their blind and appalling faith in the printed word is one symptom), the students have not in any significant way involved themselves as human beings in what they have read or written. In writing for someone else the way they have, they become less than who they are.

One further thing to be noted about the phenomenology of the student responses I have quoted, perhaps the greatest of the illiteracies here, is that all four of them, and all responses like them, were judged by the examiners--that is, the officials of the Educational Testing Service in conjunction with the actual readers of the examinations, educators drawn from a number of colleges and high schools throughout the country--all such responses were judged as worthy of the top score awarded on the test. Our concern as readers of the examination, we were told, and told rightly I think, was to be neither political nor moral. But we were also told that in spite of its ambiguity, the question we were working with we were to consider as designed solely to test the students' awareness of matters technical and rhetorical. Since the scoring of the responses to the question could be evaluated on that basis, they were therefore going to be evaluated on that basis, and on that basis alone--as though language meant no more than it said, as though the matter of style were no more than a matter of taste. Newsweekese.

Finally, as a way of addressing the question of whether or not there is a "literacy crisis" in the United States, in the sense of there being some brand new fall from some traditional state of Grace, I would like to point out that the situation I have just described occurred in 1962. It would not be particularly difficult to find examples of the same thing a hundred years before that, or to move back from the 1860's to Jonathan Swift's excoriation of madness, to Pope on dullness in the Dunciad.

The situation of the AP examination epitomises what for me is the real literacy problem in the United States and why to conceive of literacy as involving no more than an awareness of conventions, in terms of correctness only, merely perpetuates it. What I would call true literacy, the ability to make sense of what one reads and with what one writes, is really the ability to conceptualize, to build structures, to draw inferences, to see implications, to generalize intelligently--in short to make connections, to make relationships, between words and other words, sentences and other sentences, this idea and that idea, language and experience, what is being said and who one is. But concern with only the appearance of this conceptualizing process, far from being a step on the way to an involvement with it, is really a step in another direction, leads away from involvement in much the same way that sex manuals can lead the loveless even further from love--as the situation of the AP examination demonstrates. What's really appalling about that situation is not that the students should have condemned DeVoto's prose and didn't; I'm much less interested in students being liberal or conservative than I am in their being aware of themselves as liberal or conservative, of what it means for them to be liberal or conservative. What's appalling is that the majority of students had no idea of what they were doing with DeVoto--not any more than did the examiners who made the exam. It's what comes of concern with convention that has no reference to what the convention is about or for.

I want to make very clear--you see how careful ones learns to become in trying to forestall ignorant criticism--I want to make very clear that I am not for a moment suggesting that I think we ought to forget about what Newsweek calls literacy and concern ourselves as teachers of reading and writing with something else instead: social issues, consciousness-razing, entertainment with films or art prints--the fluff of the late 60's. What I am suggesting is the necessity of providing a context for

correctness that will make it possible to insist on in the name of something. This is why I think that language understood in its broadest sense, the means by which we run orders through chaos, shape whatever worlds we live in, and as a consequence give ourselves the identities we have, ought to be the focus of all courses designed to enable students to become literate. For to see writing and reading both as forms of language-using is to be able to suggest that the processes involved in writing and reading--those of selecting, arranging, putting together--are relevant to all disciplines and to any life, whether one's language is chemical symbols or mathematical notation, gestures, colors, notes, or words. It is to be able to suggest to a future physicist, say, that a better understanding of the workings of the English language can enable her to become more conscious of what she is doing as a user of the language of physics--and vice versa. The sames goes for a future historian, mathematician, musician, or anthropologist. And it is to be able to insist that facility with the processes of reading and writing, more than being a requirement for a student to fulfill is the sine qua non of his education. To become alive to the implications of language-using is not, of course, to become free, but it is to have choices that one cannot have without such an awareness. This is what I see the hullabaloo over correctness giving us a chance to shoot for as teachers. There is no reason we cannot use the concern with what are called "mechanics" to introduce our students to an idea of them as much more than that. There is no reason we cannot use concern with the way sentences look to talk with our students about what sentences are, and about what it can mean to read and to write them. There is no reason we can't use their Mozart to talk about ours--pretending, whenever we need to, like Benchley, that neither did we understand there were two.