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## What's my Name?

### Communications in education today

*"Literature thrives in the lived world as part of the process of human communication." There has always been recognition of that emphasis on "part," and in acknowledgment of the Greek and Renaissance humanist tradition in modern education, Donald Theall recalls the awareness among the outstanding literary figures of those eras — long before English literature became a study — of the importance of the non-literary milieu of which their art was a most intense expression. But it is the awakening of an acute modern consciousness of the need to understand the disorders of communication, within what should become a democratic society, that has challenged English studies in his view either to meet that need or, surrendering the task to the social sciences, to go the way of classical and rhetorical studies into near extinction.*

Language occupies a privileged place in relation to all other modes of human communicative and expressive activity, but that fact becomes meaningless if the way that language develops in a reciprocal relationship to those other modes is overlooked. From the days of ancient grammatical and rhetorical studies, until the present-day emphasis on the relationship between the study of communications and school curriculum in native speech, there has been an ongoing theoretical debate about this relationship. There is a strong theoretic and historic naivete in raising the question as somehow uniquely modern and as specifically related to the emergence of the mass media. The problem is older than the emergence of the study of national literatures in the late Eighteenth Century, and therefore considerably older than the rather recent position of prominence which the study of English, for example, has come to have in the school system.

Twentieth Century literary critics became interested in this problem very early in the century, as shown in the writings of poet-critics like Pound and Eliot.<sup>1</sup> Before the third decade I. A. Richards (along with Ogden) had argued

that a theory of communication was an essential feature of any theory of criticism, a line of thinking that led directly to the work of Northrop Frye. Early in the 30s, Kenneth Burke, whose major importance as a critical and theoretic thinker has only recently been recognized, followed the pragmatist tradition of Dewey and Mead in asserting the important reciprocity between social communications and an understanding of literature and art. Burke's early seminal work, *Permanence and Change*, was originally to be entitled "A Treatise on Communication" and according to the author was "written in that spirit."<sup>2</sup>

### **Art and poetics: intensified human communications**

Later, we will suggest the importance of subsequent parallel developments in the United Kingdom and France. Burke's position begins with a recognition of the historic importance of drama as the focus for literary and artistic activity. He is acutely aware of the prominence that poetics — a term describing an art of *making* regardless of the particular medium or mixture of media — occupied in Aristotle's thought.<sup>3</sup> Drama is the basis, according to Burke, for understanding the arts and communicative interaction in society. Art, in fact, as Dewey recognized, can come to assume its value only in relation to other communicative activity, for one of its essential aspects is its bio-social, ecological function of continually purifying the means by which humans communicate.<sup>4</sup> Pound had argued that the value of literary and poetic work could only be understood comparatively. Dewey and Burke provide a powerful theoretic background to such an intuitive awareness, as well as extending its area of significance from the arts to the social sphere.

Burke emerged from influences similar to those of the Canadian historian of political economy and communications, Harold Innis, who was aware of the interplay both between the oral and written media and between the non-verbal and verbal arts of expression in classical Greece.<sup>5</sup> Intense communication emerged in a milieu where the reciprocity between different modes of expression and communication was understood and entered into the process of teaching. It also appears to have been the result of a characteristic set of social and cultural conditions involved in the development of the Greek city states. Reciprocity between teaching and everyday social life was the natural corollary of the reciprocity between the oral and written, between the verbal and non-verbal.

Tragedy was traditionally the highest form of poetry, partly because of the complex involvement of a number of different expressive arts. Rhetoric involved an awareness of the arts of gesture and movement, of delivery, and of the arts of painting and architecture. Francis Yates has shown the persistent importance of the visual arts, particularly architecture, in shaping the art of memory and the development of the Elizabethan theatre.<sup>6</sup> An interpenetration of all the modes of expression and communication is characteristic of important historical currents in Western artistic and intellectual life. This awareness has always included

an awareness of the “lower” forms — that substantial body of human activity which has contributed to what Frye calls “the low mimetic genres.”<sup>7</sup> Some of the major literary-pedagogic figures of the early Renaissance clearly illustrate how understanding of the “low forms” occupied an important place in achieving a critique and a transcendence of everyday life. For example, Bakhtin’s massive study on Rabelais clearly shows the importance to Rabelais’ writing of the carnivalesque world and other forms of everyday humour based on the lower animal aspects of man. Erasmus and More both engaged in collecting the “merry jests” which later became an important part of Shakespeare’s plays, as well as contributing to the satiric wit which shaped the *Utopia* and the *Praise of Folly*.

Unfortunately, humanism in its classical or Erasmian form does not adequately satisfy the contemporary sensibility, since Nietzsche and Marx have exposed the genuinely human limits of the position. But humanism still provides a central body of historical material necessary to understanding the way that the pedagogical process has evolved in Western history. Classical Greece and Renaissance humanism are still important touchstones in the teaching of English, and accordingly the foregoing observations have been introduced to suggest that certain relations between everyday life, the range of modes of expression and communication, and literature and art continue to exist in different times and in different places. In the contemporary context, both the possibilities of modes of expression and communication and the ways they can be transmitted and reproduced have increased exponentially, as the German literary theorist Walter Benjamin recognized early in the 30s when he wrote his seminal essay on “Technological Reproducibility in the Work of Art.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Discrimination and the understanding of everyday life**

Perhaps such thoughts, combined with an historical reflection on the pedagogical directions of humanism, can be of some assistance in considering why what many have regarded as a pure activity, namely English studies, has more and more insistently been invaded by the claims of art, film studies, the media, communications, and popular culture. In fact, the list that concludes this last sentence is significant, for while all these areas are inter-related with literature and drama, most of them (except what we call “art”) have been grouped by some teachers and some theorists under one pejorative label — whether it be media, film, communications, or just plain junk. But the problem is not that simple.

Much earlier in the Twentieth Century, such different literary minds as Ezra Pound and F. R. Leavis recognized that English studies were involved in the development of discrimination. Discrimination can only be developed by a complex process of comparison and recognition, as Pound stressed in *The ABC of Reading*.<sup>9</sup> Art movements which linked literature, film, and the visual arts

(such as surrealism and dadaism, the forerunners of our more recent “pop art”) engaged literature, drama, and the other arts in developing an ecology of sense which would provide discriminations necessary for living in the contemporary world. As with Rabelais in the Sixteenth Century and Joyce in the Twentieth, such activity required going to the marketplace, to the circus, and to the carnival to understand everyday life and to provide the discrimination which would transform it rather than merely transcend and reject it.<sup>10</sup> If Joyce, as many critics maintain, is a classic figure of the contemporary world, then it is tantamount to a rejection of his own vision and experience to prevent reflection on the everyday world from being included within the same poetic parameters as reflection on literature and the arts.

Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* was a natural extension of *Ulysses*, insisting on the importance of understanding the crisis in communication as the only way to renewal, renaissance, and social revolution in the modern world. But communication is not just a question of media, or of specific arts, or of popular culture. When people speak of the role of communication studies in relation to English studies, they associate themselves with the largest and most significant post-war movement in literary theory and criticism, the semiological and structuralist movements which first arose in France. Those movements recognized that literature thrives in the lived world as part of the process of human communication. Literature then cannot cut itself off from the visual arts, from the arts of sound, the arts of design, the dramatic arts, the newly recognized art forms in film and extended film (such as those described by Gene Youngblood).<sup>11</sup> In fact, the language we use as well as the signs the other arts and modes of expression use are reciprocal in the way they make sense (and produce what we usually think of as meaning).

Language is influenced by images, by dance, by design, by structured movement, just as the interpretation of images, design, dance, or structured movement is influenced by language. This is the reason why there is constant talk about the arts, ranging from gossip, anecdote, and journalism to criticism and interpretation. The one who makes does not necessarily want what he has made to be talked about, but it is only through that process of talk that what he has made lives and has a living influence on life. The process of “talking about” is relating what we know to what we are in the process of discovering. It is accordingly useful to reflect deliberately on what we know as well as on what we are trying to know, for otherwise our rejection of what we know through everyday experience becomes the primary way to guarantee its unconscious effect on our action. Consequently, the study of the marketplace is essential, if only to question its values and transform its energies. Even an Eighteenth Century critic like Addison could recognize the importance of taking philosophy into the marketplace. That necessity does not stop because the marketplace changes.

## Talk about the art: its ecological role

A few artists have recognized the importance of interpretation or of talk about the arts. From the past there is the example of Pope and Swift, among others; from the near present there is the example of Joyce. Joyce staged *Finnegans Wake* so as to build up a process of talk about it, which he later incorporated into the work. This building of a process of talk about the work also recognized (as Joyce had recognized in *Ulysses*) that understanding must encompass the everyday world in all its banality and all its cliché. Comedy turned such dross into the gold of poetry (and poetry, it ought to be remembered, is a term that has been wrongly made exclusive to poets in words, for it originally meant the entire range of creative possibilities). In his work Joyce included headlines, ad slogans, figures from comic strips, radio, television, tabloids, animated film, and the whole range of popular cultural experience which is only recently being considered seriously as “para-literary” and “para-esthetic.”<sup>12</sup> Even though the world he conceived was not meant to be bound to the banal or to the cliché, the way was only to be found by understanding the lower aspects of everyday life as well as its potential creativity.

All this may seem very abstract from the point of view of a school or university curriculum, but it translates into such terms. The translation is not difficult because of its intellectual complexity but because of the polemic atmosphere in which it must be raised. No one working with art will any longer abandon criteria of value, or argue for indoctrinating students in the valueless. In no way does *All in the Family* or *Kojak* represent an important lasting value; though the case may be different with *Star Trek*, even if its values need to be seriously questioned and drastically downgraded in the face of a discriminating intellect. Yet the fact that such works provide the symbols of the marketplace makes them as essential to understanding the present, as the “lower” parts of Shakespeare’s vision are essential to any responsible interpretation of his works. It is quite possible that the effect of allowing serious consideration of such phenomena to occur only within social sciences (such as sociology or social psychology) has contributed significantly to the way in which they currently are able to influence our subconscious lives.

In the 50’s a poet-sociologist (Reuel Denney, Reisman’s collaborator) and two literary critics (Marshall McLuhan and Roland Barthes, now a distinguished professor at the University of Paris) pointed out the over-riding importance of taking account of this fact. They followed a conservative painter-author, Wyndham Lewis, in arguing this point of view. In the interim, while the schools and the universities have dabbled in such areas, they have never undertaken serious consideration of popular culture and media, nor, more importantly, have they systematically tried to join education in perception and education of the senses with education in literature and composition. What is most frequently attacked are inadequate attempts to handle such problems, often carried

on by those not fully qualified; or, when carried on by those fully qualified, carried on under conditions of understaffing and inadequate commitment of time and resources. Such practice is hardly an adequate test of a theory; and to argue from such particular examples is hardly justified, since in most jurisdictions the same thing has happened as in Quebec. There the important and avant-garde study of Marcel Rioux on the arts in education has been largely overlooked except possibly in the somewhat better established areas of drama.<sup>13</sup> When the provincialism of English studies reaches a point, partly under public pressure, of abandoning movement in such directions in the interest of the safety of the traditional, it can safely be said that at some time in the future English will go the way of first classical and then rhetorical studies — vacating the central part of the school curriculum to social sciences, which are not as conversant with problems of art and interpretation.

### **The centrality of the study of human communications**

The issue that is usually put as film and/or media *versus* English alone, and described as “the invasion of communication studies,” neatly evades the real problem: Is there anything more important than the study of human communications? Nietzsche, almost 80 years ago, argued that art’s major importance was that it provided communication of the greatest intensity and influenced the whole process of human communication.<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, in giving birth to one aspect of modern pedagogy, stressed the relationship between education, art, and communication within the context of an awareness of the importance of everyday communication; for Dewey’s arguments involved an awareness of the importance of communication to a genuinely democratic society. The process involved understanding the community, and if the community is emmeshed in what teachers, scholars, poets, and intellectuals should consider banal, it nevertheless cannot be changed without a genuine understanding of the very structure of that banality. Such an understanding engages socio-economic and political questions which schools frequently shy away from, unless they are acting in the interests of one nationalist majority or another. As the processes of communication may have become distorted within the culture, this understanding requires first of all some interpretation of the parameters of that total living culture. Neither Chaucer, nor Shakespeare, nor even Brecht, reduced by the filter of Hallmark Cards, will have a very central effect in the absence of the kind of understanding which Rabelais, in the humanist Renaissance, and Joyce, in our current potential Renaissance, realized was necessary.

Communication is human, personal, social, and erotic. It is only within such a framework that any teaching of reading, writing, literature, or junk becomes meaningful. That process of communication is complex, moving from the interpersonal act of communication between people to the way that everyone tries through mediated experience to influence one another. That mediated experience may be valuable, as in great art such as Dante, Milton,

Goëthe or Mann, or it may be distorted, as in the average output of our daily media. Yet that again does not mean that the journalism of Addison or Defoe might not have been superior to the writing of Shadwell and the plays of Colley Cibber. Just because something is called literature by publishers, contemporary critics, or even fellow writers, it does not necessarily guarantee its permanence or its authenticity, its value or its importance. What students need are the arts of expression, interpretation, and discrimination, not the authority of grammar rules, canons of explanation, and imposition of standards. Perhaps it would even be as well should English studies fail to survive, if, like classical education and rhetorical education, they fail to evolve a discourse of challenge in the context of social relationships experienced by the people who are being educated.

## NOTES

1. Discussed in the writings of H. M. McLuhan. See especially D. F. Theall, *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan* (Montreal: McGill — Queen's Press, 1971), pp. 16-17 and Ch. 12-13. See also Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1965), pp. 9-15.
2. K. Burke, *Permanence and Change* (New York: Bobbs-Merill, 1965).
3. *Poetics*, pp. 1447a-1448a.
4. D. Theall, *The Ecology of Sense* (to be published late 1979). See especially F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: in Science, Nature, Society and Art*, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Frederick Publications, 1960), Ch. 4.
5. See especially John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1958).
6. F. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1966).
7. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
8. W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), pp. 219-55.
9. Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, n.d.).
10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968).
11. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970).
12. Paraliterature is the study of forms of literature which are not usually recognized as "literature", such as science fiction, the Western, dime novels, popular romance, detective stories, etc. "Paraesthetics" concerns the broader range which includes forms of expression other than writing or print and theories concerning such esthetic activity. For further information see the *Proceedings of the Conference on Paraliterature*, McGill University, Spring, 1978, published in mimeographed form by the McGill Comparative Literature Program. The distinction between paraliterature and paraesthetics is discussed in a forthcoming article of mine entitled "Paraliterature and Paraesthetics" which was originally presented to that Conference.
13. *Rapport de la Commission d'enquête sur l'enseignement des arts au Québec*, 3v., Marcel Rioux, président (Québec: l'Éditeur officiel du Québec, 1968).
14. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. (n. 4).