

# composition & resistance

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# How We Apples Swim

James Sledd

What are we really doing at this conference?

Our assigned theme is "The Right to Literacy." The organizers have defined literacy broadly, in ads and announcements for the conference, as "the ability to use language in order to become an active participant in all forms of public discourse." So defined, literacy is impossible in the United States, and there can be no right to the impossible.

The proof of those wounding propositions is easy. Competent public discourse requires a large supply of general and special information; for without information, "the ability to use language" is only the ability to babble aimlessly. The assigned definition therefore requires that literates shall have not just a productive and receptive command of many linguistic registers in both speech and writing but also free access to needed information and free access to the media by which information may be exchanged. Those huge requirements are nowhere met. In the United States, the people who control the educational system and the media do not even want such free, informed, and general participation in public affairs.

To exemplify, consider first the familiar situation of a composition teacher -- a big state university's primary worker for literacy. At the University of Texas at Austin, in many ways a representative institution, composition has been and still is mainly taught by underpaid but overworked graduate students and lecturers. They have only the smallest of voices in university governance, and administrators provide them only such information as the administrators choose. A few years ago, some fifty lecturers had to learn from the campus newspaper that

This essay was originally presented at the 1988 MLA Right to Literacy Conference.

their appointments would not be renewed for the following year. Too late for a hopeful job-hunt, they were simply set adrift. In the late spring of 1988, graduate students similarly learned from the campus newspaper what the administrators had known for weeks—namely, that the law would no longer allow the university to pay the students' insurance premiums. Without insurance, an already impecunious family could be ruined. Thus, by the definition established for this [1988 MLA "Right to Literacy"] conference—a definition which makes information essential to literacy—verbally gifted literacy workers at UT must be judged illiterate. They cannot participate actively even in discourse concerning their own work in a public university.

If literacy is confined to active participants in public discourse about university matters, then tenured and tenurable faculty at Texas are themselves by no means full literate. In getting and giving information relevant to their employment, they have difficulties comparable to those of the graduate students and part-timers, though less severe. Within the university, information flows mainly downward—when it flows at all. Administrators, and especially the higher administrators, have their newsletters and other brag-sheets. They have their wide network of administrative communication, national as well as local, and they can easily make themselves seen and heard in the newspapers and on radio and TV. They are the university's public voice, with an Office of Institutional Studies to provide them with whatever statistics may best suit their purposes. Faculty, on the other hand, speak publicly as private citizens only. They are well advised to limit voluntary communication with their academic superiors to channels established by the administrative hierarchy, and crucial information may simply be denied them. Rash souls who ask to see their own personnel files may not even be aware that administrators may first edit those files severely, and questions addressed to administrators in such bodies as the University Council may be evaded with doubletalk.

By the definition of literacy which has been assigned to us, illiteracy is indeed the prevailing condition of *all* citizens in the Land of the Free. In the recent past, congressional investigators were by no means able, even if they were willing, to learn in detail how a corrupt shadow-government made war on Nicaragua, in defiance of the citizens and their elected representatives. The former President and Vice-President of the United States went so far as to imply publicly that, by the MLA's definition, they too were illiterate. They did not know, they said, what was going on. The general tenor of their behavior makes that claim most plausible.

Perhaps a reminder is in order that the preceding examples of illiteracy *are* based on the MLA's own definition. Conferees must assume that the definition was carefully framed with an eye to its

implications and that it is not a mere cover for hidden purposes. That obligatory assumption combines with the given examples to enable us now to say at least what we are probably *not* doing at this conference. Despite the assigned theme and the assigned definition of literacy, we are hardly participating, with the Modern Language Association, in "the building of a national upheaval" (Kozol). It is most unlikely that the moguls of the MLA have acquired a sudden interest in helping to work the deep social, economic, and educational changes which would be necessary to make active participation "in all forms of public discourse" open to everyone. For whatever mysterious reason, we are not abiding by the definition's undeniable implications.

The most plausible *affirmative* answer to the question what are we doing is then disheartening. Unless we do abide by the letter and spirit of the assigned definition of literacy, we are only serving ourselves, in disregard of logic. We are polishing apples and egos, padding our resumes, proving that "the ability to use language" without logical content is rightly characterized as the ability to babble. Some of us are babbling the catchwords of "cultural literacy," the contradictory, unworkable, and therefore much praised scheme which E. D. Hirsch has based on misunderstanding and misrepresentation of inadequate linguistic authorities. And as we serve ourselves, we may very well be impeding rational action by giving the false impression that rational action is already being taken. The wordy wars of inveterate conference-goers usually bring nothing else about.

If by some freak the conference *should* have some real effect, the emphasis on language in its definition of literacy is likely to be narrowly confining. If we teach the formal competencies of reading and writing to students who cannot hope for free access to information and the media, we may simply provide our bosses with another instrument of domination. Our bosses want a citizenry which is open to dictation. They want a "work force" which has been brainwashed into docility but which has the technical abilities from which the bosses profit. A true concern for literacy must therefore also be a concern for social revolution. But the MLA is not in the revolution business, no matter *how* it defines literacy.

I turn now from the conference and its organizers' puzzling choice of a definition of the literacy to which they affirm a right, and accordingly the pronoun *we* now shifts to a more restricted reference.

Only a fool would expect professors of English to lead a revolution; but some few small things we *can* do (if improbably we will). We should begin at home, in a sustained attempt to break the prevailing system of exploitation in our own departments—the exploitation of graduate students and part-timers, the general dislike for teaching composition, the general injustice to composition teachers. In the

exploited, our effort would have the crucial support of an articulate group motivated by a genuine grievance.

Sue Ellen Holbrook's paper, "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition," at the 1988 meeting of the 4C's was a most articulate documentation of that grievance. Here is one paragraph from her abstract:

Pedagogic in focus, its place in the curriculum conceived as "service" and elementary, extensively using paraprofessionals, allied with education departments and school teaching, and saturated by women practitioners, composition has become women's work. And so it will remain as long as those conditions remain. The transformation of composition from women's work to a sexually integrated and well-esteemed profession can come only as a part of the larger complex processes of raising the status of teaching itself and the other service occupations in a capitalist society, breaking down the sexual division of labor, achieving social and economic equity between women and men, and re-valoring socially produced differences between the masculine and feminine genders.

The attempt, of course, to make the teaching of composition in the universities as respected as it is respectable would face the entrenched self-interest of many of our colleagues, the established literati who dominate the MLA. Even more frighteningly, it would face our country's whole damned and damning economic system — by which, to cite an outrageous instance, the University of Texas refuses ever to pay a tenured or tenurable composition staff yet can find millions and millions for the consortium known as the Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation and for the greedy band of corporations called Sematech, which the great Democrat Michael Dukakis tried to lure to Massachusetts.

Bruising experience teaches that such taxing and spending adversaries, like hard-core Reaganites, are inaccessible to rational conversation. Talkative conferences won't overwhelm corporate communities of knowledgeably grasping peers. Besides, the corporate executives control the accumulation, storage, and dissemination of knowledge and the media by which it is or isn't disseminated. Concerted action to escape that control, at least on one small academic front, would have to come before sane talking could even be heard. But if the MLA's professors are genuinely concerned for literacy, they ought to support such radical acts as loud resignations by directors of exploited composition staffs, equally loud refusals to fill the vacated directorships, unionization, repeated teach-ins in lower-division courses, well publicized demonstrations by teachers of composition and their students and friends, even strikes, walkouts, and the peaceful occupation of the offices of deans and presidents.

If such action did make at least a narrow gap in the prevailing limits on the thinkable and the speakable, then proponents of humanely employed literacy might make a successful appeal to the people. Parents alarmed by talk of a "literacy crisis" might be even more alarmed if teachers could tell them, openly and strongly, how little the higher-education establishment really cares for general literacy among an informed and active majority. The MLA might be prodded into *acting* on the implications of its definition of literacy.

Those proposals are very limited. They touch only that small proportion of the total population, mainly white, which makes its way to the big universities. Even so, to make them as the world now stands is to invite ridicule as a foolish dreamer. It may still be answered that ridicule is not reserved for the ridiculous. A society cannot reasonably demand that all students master its standard language unless the society gives them all a real chance to learn and use it and real rewards for using it well, and it is not contemptible to set one's own house in order before sermonizing one's neighbors. University professors of English do dominate the MLA.

Dominant professional attitudes, it has been said, not only guarantee but will continue to guarantee that teachers of English cannot contribute to significant social change but help instead and will keep helping to maintain the present unjust system of dominance and submission. The challenge to this conference is to refute that uncomfortable accusation, at least in some small way.

If we do not refute it, we should be required every day to contemplate the old saying, "How we apples swim!" Tilley's *Dictionary of Proverbs* records Roger L'Estrange's exposition of it:

Upon a fall of rain, the current carried away a huge heap of apples, together with a dunghill that lay in the watercourse. As they went thus, the horse-turds would be crying out still, "Alack a day! How we apples swim!"