Robert
Pattison

On Literacy

The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock

ON LITERACY

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE *Blithering Agamemnon: The Borders of Literacy* 3

Literacy and Consciousness 4
The Wild Boy and Gracie Allen 10
Agamemnon and the Physical Basis of Literacy 15
Literacy and Language 21

CHAPTER TWO *Chief Cobb vs. Themistocles: The Technologies of Rhetoric, Reading, and Writing* 29

Rhetoric 30
Reading and Writing 32
Athens: Writing as a Cultural Force 40
Sparta and Fear of Writing 56

CHAPTER THREE *Word against Empire: Literacy and Power* 61

Rome: Universal Language and World Domination 62
The Revolutionary Literacy of the Church 69

Formal and Vernacular Literacy in the Middle Ages 75
Literacy as Battleground: Then and Now 83

CHAPTER FOUR *When Media Collide: Literacy and the Advent of Print* 86

Media Use Is Organic 88
"Get It in Writing!": Medieval Written Culture 90
The Word, the Press, and the Reformation: John Wycliffe 98
The Text, the Press, and Orthodoxy: John Donne 104
The Word and Revolution: John Bunyan 107
The Miltonic Compromise: Old Made New 109
Print and Television 114

CHAPTER FIVE *Iran to Ann Landers: Fallacies about Literacy and Development* 118

Skill in Reading and Writing Does Not a Mighty Nation Make 119
The Iranian Example 124
The Psychological Burden of Illiteracy 129
The Prisoner Phenomenon 134

CHAPTER SIX *Hopefully into the Future: John Locke and Correct Usage* 138

Standard Usage and the Rise of Capitalism 139
The Liberal Fallacy: Truth, Progress, and Literacy 147
The Cult of Correct Usage 155
Some Thoughts on Teaching English 165

CHAPTER SEVEN *Caliban in America: Literacy in the Age of Rock* 170

Mechanical Literacy 171
Followers and Leaders: Two Literacies 178
Training the Literate Elite 181
Illiterate Backlash 187
Orthodox American Literacy 190
The New Literacy 200

CHAPTER EIGHT *Conclusion* 208

NOTES 215

BIBLIOGRAPHY 221

INDEX 237

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ON LITERACY

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CHAPTER ONE

Blithering Agamemnon: The Borders of Literacy

Congratulations. Because you can read and transcribe this sentence, you are considered by every country of the United Nations to be literate. In some countries this ability would place you in a decided minority—in Afghanistan, for instance, you would be among an elite 12 percent of the population. In the United States, however, your literacy consigns you to the majority. According to the latest government figures on literacy, only 1 percent of the American public is incapable of reading and writing, and this small fraction consists largely of elderly, black farmworkers.

Other concepts of literacy have lately begun to undermine the reassuring mechanical certainty of government statistics. The work of UNESCO, of Marshall McLuhan, of anthropologists, of linguists, of social historians, of every elementary, secondary, and now college teacher too is increasingly concerned with some sense of the word literacy, and not always in the straightforward sense of reading and writing skills.

Few people today agree on the term's definition. Each writer on the subject defines the word anew or qualifies it with an adjective. We have scholarly articles and public debates on functional literacy, on full literacy, on semi-literacy, on pre-literacy, and even on super-literacy—a state supposedly achieved by minorities who use illiteracy as a form of rebellion by which they scorn their oppressors. Anthropologists and social historians must define literacy for each study they undertake. One writer on the Middle Ages calls literate all those who can read or write in any language; another insists that to be literate the medieval man had to have a reading knowledge of Latin. The United States Census Bureau has measured literacy in two ways—in one test by the ability to read and write simple messages in any language, in another by years of schooling. The army on the other hand applies a functional definition—does the person read and write well enough to understand written instructions? Sociologists have devised still other measures of functional literacy, and these do not exhaust the possible uses of the term. We need a universal definition of literacy for scholar and ordinary citizen alike, applicable to the past and present and serviceable for the future. What follows is an attempt at such a definition.

LITERACY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Two very different senses of literacy exist side by side in common English usage. If I say, "A census conducted in 1962 indicates that 98.5 percent of all Upper Voltans are illiterate," most people will assume I mean that the vast majority of the population of Upper Volta lacks the technical skills of reading and writing. I would be making no judgment of the Upper Voltan mind or character, any more than I would be if I observed that most Tibetans cannot drive cars. But if a New Yorker remarks that most Californians he has met are illiterate, few will misinterpret him to mean that they cannot read or write. His statement is a studied insult to some basic aspect of Californians' intelligence. Do these two widely different usages have anything in common? Are we justified in using one word to embrace so many phenomena?

I think the answer to both these questions is yes. Literacy may not be a term like justice or goodness, for which philosophers have sought enduring metaphysical definitions, but it may usefully be compared to terms like agriculture and politics, which denote broad but recognizable areas of human activity. We can appreciate that diverse phenomena like Vergil's *Georgics*, Malthus's *Essay on Population*, and McCormick's reaper have an interest in common that we can call agricultural. Without doing violence to the word politics, we can profitably employ it for a fuller understanding of the operation of the Soviet Union, of Eskimo tribes, and of university faculties. The English word literacy lends itself to a similarly wide significance. It denotes consciousness of the questions posed by language coupled with mastery of those skills by which a culture at any given moment in its history manifests this consciousness.

Different people and different societies will be conscious of themselves as users of language in different ways, and will display their awareness in different media and with different skills, yet each may be called literate. Over the last four hundred years reading and writing have been the primary skills by which Western civilization has expressed its consciousness of itself as a language-using organism, and so we are accustomed to regard the attainment of these talents as synonymous with literacy itself, but our own common usage and that of other cultures belies so simple an equation. On some occasions, Aristotle uses the Greek word for illiteracy, *agrammatia*, to mean the inability to read or write; on others, he uses it in a broader sense to mean the lack of awareness of the uses of language. He even applies the term to animals: some animals have a voice, and, of these, some make ordered, mutually intelligible sounds, while others simply make noise without any purpose or organization. These last beasts Aristotle calls illiterate. This sense of the word must be something like what Rebecca West means when, in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* attacking a biography in which she is quoted, she says, "I appear throughout the book as dispensing gossip in a vulgar and illiterate manner." In other words, she believes the offending author to have portrayed her as someone who expatiates without any consciousness or control of her language. The New Yorker who chides the Californian must have a similar definition in mind.

Consciousness of the uses and problems of language is the foundation of literacy, but the literate person must also be able to express this consciousness in the ways evolved and sanctioned by the culture in which he lives. At present American culture anticipates that its members shall be able to read and write, and for us these skills are an intimate part of any definition of literacy. But some cultures do not demand these specific accomplishments as part of their definition of literacy. Cicero, speaking of the great Roman orators of the generations preceding his, calls one *litteratus* because of his fine sense for the right word and another *litteratius*—more literate than his contemporaries—because he was better spoken. Cicero is using the Latin word from which our term literate comes, but in his mind the foremost skill requisite to the full expression of one's literacy is not reading or writing, but rhetoric. By the American definition, Homer, whoever he might have been, was an illiterate because he almost certainly could neither read nor write, but I doubt it occurred to the Athenians of the fourth century B.C. to think of him as we do of high-school dropouts.

The question "Was Homer literate?" makes sense only when we have a clear notion of literacy in mind. If we insist that literacy is, was, and always will be what the West in the twentieth century defines it to be, then he was not. But if we allow each age to express literacy for itself, within the broad guideline that literacy must always refer to consciousness of language and skill in deploying this consciousness, then Homer was the paragon of literacy for the Greek world. To say that Homer was illiterate is something like saying that ancient Sparta had no economy because it wasn't capitalistic. It would be more useful to say that Homer exemplifies the literacy that flourished in the Greek world of the archaic period, but that he did not know how to read or write.

Literacy is a combination of variables—individual and cultural awareness of language and the interplay of this awareness with the means of expression. This approach will frustrate anyone looking for a simple, mechanical definition because it distinguishes between the attainment of reading and writing skills and the acquisition of literacy. Reading and writing may be parts of literacy but do not constitute the whole. Anyone accustomed to thinking of literacy as a fixed, moral quality will, I suspect, also be thwarted by this concept of the term. The distinguished critic Douglas Bush once cited as illiterate a verbal blunder in one of John Connally's campaign speeches. The Texan called for a "more virulent"—instead of a "more virile"—national defense. "A hundred years ago, when educated people were literate," Bush lamented, such a gaffe would not have occurred. Implicit in his judgment is a moral reproach to the present age. Many people use the word literacy to denote a state of mental enlightenment, an ideal realization of human intelligence, that either existed in the past and is now corrupted by the likes of John Connally or toward which the world is evolving, albeit slowly. Bush's comment locates a literate utopia in the educated society of "a hundred years ago"—when, wonderfully, no word was ever misspelled or misspoken, at least not among that fraction of the population constituting "educated people." Nonsense of this order defeats any attempt to set the study of literacy on an objective foundation. The term literacy is not profitably employed to condemn one age for not replicating the attitudes or skills enjoyed by another. And a word in Connally's defense. He may need some help with his vocabulary, but who would call the man illiterate after his Watergate performance? Tried and acquitted of a bribery charge in the Götterdämmerung of the Nixon administration, Connally later ran for the Presidency with the reassuring argument that he was the only candidate in the race who had been proven to be not guilty. Connally is certainly conscious of language and its uses. His rationale may not have been good politics, but it is essentially literate.

To say that literacy involves consciousness by individuals and cultures of the uses of language immediately elicits fundamental questions. What is meant by "consciousness" and "language"? Doesn't the use of language necessarily demand consciousness? The study of literacy does not, fortunately, require a definitive statement on either consciousness or language. If it did, it could never begin. The object of any investigation into literacy should be to discover the roles that individuals and civilizations at given moments believe consciousness and language play in their lives and to study how these ideas are manifested, both in the mechanics of expression and more broadly in the life of the culture. At the outset, it is only necessary for the student of literacy to believe that consciousness and language do in fact exist and that they might have some influence on the conduct of human affairs.

No one is likely to argue the existence of language or its influence on the lives of men. But there are enough skeptics about the existence of consciousness to demand a justification of this term. I use the term in its most mundane sense. As I type this page, I am conscious that words appear on the paper in front of me and that I or someone else might alter these words in ways that I imagine might change a reader's sense of my intention. I may have no free will to choose the words I write; they may be determined. But part of me believes I might have chosen other words. This part I call consciousness. Whether or not my freedom exists, my assertion of freedom is demonstrable.

Defined this way, even a behaviorist can accept consciousness. The behaviorist might even acquiesce in the important corollary to this definition: that not all people are conscious of language in the same way. The poet may attribute his poetry to divine inspiration; his audience, to gin. Whether either party is correct in its interpretation of consciousness does not concern the investigator of literacy. For him it does not matter if consciousness does or does not exist, but only that people believe that it does. He is curious to know what the various theories of consciousness are and how they affect the poet, the poetry, and the culture in which they appear. Consciousness of language here is a description of the relations people believe to exist between language, the mind, and the world.

Most people go through the day without often exercising their consciousness of language. If they did, society would be either surfeited with literature and brilliant conversation or paralyzed by silence. To be aware of every word and its ramifications might be either sublime or petrifying. Yet consciousness of language is innately human. It shows itself most obviously in puns, slang, rhyme, and the host of verbal tricks. Charles the Bald, the royal patron of the ninth-century philosopher Scotus Erigena, once baited his distinguished client by asking him over dinner, "What's the difference between a Scot and a sot?" The pun on the philosopher's name demonstrates the rudiments of literacy. Charles was as aware as any child of the possibilities of manipulating the world by manipulating language. Scotus's reply was "The table between us." Scotus was more literate than Charles.

Consciousness of the uses of language—the keystone of literacy—is in fact diffused throughout mankind, without apparent regard to social or economic factors. Different styles of education in the uses of language, however, may shape this consciousness in diverse ways. The judge who sentences an indigent defendant to a twenty-five-year jail term has disciplined his consciousness of language by the study of the written code of law, its ambiguities, and its interpretation. He is in this sense literate. But the defendant who cries out as he is led from the court, "This ain't no fuckin' justice," is literate after his own fashion. He is conscious of a discrepancy between his notion of the word "justice" and the actual processes of the social order. The student of literacy is not obliged to decide between the literacy of judge and defendant, but he ought to be interested in noting which form of literacy prevails in various social arenas like the courtroom.

The literate man who has understood that a discrepancy exists can then go on to decide whether he wishes to assign a higher degree of validity to language or to the phenomena it describes—perhaps he may wish to deny validity to both. In any event, the perception of the original discontinuity between language and events and the attempt to resolve it are early stages of literacy. On the attitudes they generate rest the various forms of literate behavior.

The recognition that language and its objects do not perfectly correspond is so fundamental that we may wonder if it is possible to be human without it. Three instances of this basic sort of illiteracy come to mind: the Wild Boy of Aveyron, Gracie Allen, and Homer's Agamemnon.

THE WILD BOY AND GRACIE ALLEN

When he was discovered roaming the French countryside in 1800, the Wild Boy of Aveyron could not speak or understand any language. He was somewhere around twelve years old at the time. Though his senses and health seemed unimpaired, he subsequently failed to learn how to speak, and his ability to manipulate written signs and letters of the alphabet remained inferior to the performance it is now possible to elicit from chimpanzees in language experiments. Bruno Bettelheim has diagnosed the Wild Boy as an autistic child, while other learning specialists point out that language is attained by humans at a definite time within a sequence of developmental steps, and that the Wild Boy, having missed proper training at the appropriate time, forever forfeited access to language. Whatever his case, we may take the Wild Boy as a model illiterate: unable to speak, read, write, and unaware of any relation in his life between mind, language, and reality.

The Wild Boy's lack of the mechanical language skills of speech, reading, and writing, however, is not the sole determinant of his illiteracy. If it were, then Helen Keller would also have to be classified as illiterate. But surely no one would call Helen Keller illiterate. Whatever her handicaps, the consciousness of language was alive in Helen Keller from an early age. In her autobiographical essays, *The World I Live In,* she makes it clear that for her the acquisition of language is the beginning of consciousness, of thought, of humanity:

> Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew aught, or that I lived or acted or desired. I had neither will nor intellect. . . .
>
> Since I had no power of thought, I did not compare one mental state with another. So I was not conscious of any change or process going on in my brain when my teacher began to instruct me. I merely felt keen delight in obtaining more easily what I wanted by means of the finger motions she taught me: When I learned the meaning of "I" and "me" and found that I was something, I began to think. Then consciousness first existed for me. Thus it was not the sense of touch that brought me knowledge. It was the awakening of my soul that first rendered my

> senses their value, their cognizance of objects, names, qualities, and properties. Thought made me conscious of love, joy, and all the emotions.

For Helen Keller, as for many modern philosophers and linguists, language is the indispensable human attribute, the means by which we know ourselves and the world. Once we possess it, we enter into a dialogue with life by which both we and the world are continually the richer:

> I came later to look for an image of my emotions and sensations in others. I had to learn the outward signs of inward feelings. . . . Groping, uncertain, I at last found my identity, and after seeing my thoughts and feelings repeated in others, I gradually constructed my world of men and of God. As I read and study, I find that this is what the rest of the race has done. Man looks within himself and in time finds the measure and meaning of the universe.

To be conscious of oneself as a user of language—to master "the outward signs of inward feelings"—is to begin to take the measure of creation. For Helen Keller, the use of signs is the germ of all ideas, the starting point for life.

By this standard, the Wild Boy of Aveyron, locked in the dark and languageless confines of his undeveloped mind, does seem to be the prototypical illiterate. It is only fair to note, however, that other observers believe consciousness and thought exist beyond and before language. For Piaget, "the structuration characteristic of intelligence" precedes all the modes of expression—some primary ability to organize events in the mind comes before and in part determines the uses of language. Gilbert Ryle and philosophers of the positivist school also hold that thought can be divorced from any mode of expression. Perhaps they are right. In speaking or writing, people will often remark that they would like to say exactly what they think, as if the thought was an entity that needed translation into language rather than being itself a verbal event. Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, the doctor who cared for the Wild Boy, once purposely punished his mute ward without reason, even though the boy had just performed a lesson to perfection. The boy was not merely confused and morose, as animals are when unjustly or unintelligibly punished; he was indignant. Did he, without language, understand the concept of justice? If he did, then perhaps we do live in a world of transcendent realities generally known to us in the imprecise medium of language but present to us with or without language—a world quite different from the one Helen Keller describes.

Whichever view is correct, the Wild Boy must still be considered an illiterate. Whatever language does for us, he did not possess a consciousness of its uses or any skill in its deployment. His case, though, and the debates that surround it, may serve as a warning that literacy, even literacy in the fundamental sense we have been discussing, is not a magical attribute that defines the uniqueness of man. The Wild Boy possessed some essential humanity beyond the uses of consciousness and language. His teacher Itard felt the boy's humanity. Truffaut celebrated it in *L'Enfant sauvage.* Even total illiteracy does not strip us of our humanity. Nor can we be sure that other species do not possess some sort of literacy. It may be that dolphins or whales pass many fruitful hours in the consciousness of themselves as users of language and the manipulation of their means of expression. We do not know, nor does it matter. For the moment it is only important to point out that the study of literacy is from the beginning involved in some way with the nature of thought, of mind, and of language.

I pick Gracie Allen to represent another basic type of illiteracy, though any number of similar comic types would suffice to define it—Stan Laurel, Chico Marx, Shakespeare's clowns. But not Shakespeare's fools. A Shakesperian fool is always literate. Touchstone is a master of language, and

Lear's fool knows better than his master the discrepancy that exists between language and the practice of the world. The clown, however, is generally impervious to the questions posed by language.

The clown carries insensitivity to language to its absurd, illiterate extreme. He operates like a computer, capable of spewing forth words, sentences, puns, *aperçus,* but unconscious of what he does. The illiterate clown is a producer but never a consumer of wit. Though he can speak, and perhaps even read and write (in *A Night at the Opera* Chico Marx can read the famous contract even though he won't be fooled by its Santa-ty Claus), he is devoid of any critical awareness of language. For the clown, language is simple and inflexible, habitual but unconscious. Not everyone appreciates clown humor, but it is an enduring element of culture. Here are Burns and Allen in an early vaudeville routine:

> *Gracie:* On my way in, a man stopped me at the stage door and said, "Hiya, cutie, how about a bite tonight after the show?"
>
> *George:* And you said?
>
> *Gracie:* I said, "I'm busy after the show, but I'm not doing anything now," so I bit him.
>
> *George:* Gracie, let me ask you something. Did the nurse ever happen to drop you on your head when you were a baby?
>
> *Gracie:* Oh no, we couldn't afford a nurse, my mother had to do it.

The clown is programmed to understand language only in its most literal form. He cannot adjust for context, tone, or nuance.

The illiterate clown is a creature of the stage. It is difficult to imagine that there are many—or any—people as obtuse to the uses of language as the Gracie Allen of vaudeville.

It is even harder to imagine a whole culture sunk in illiteracy of this sort. Like the Wild Boy of Aveyron, the clown is a freak, a rarity. The clown is a literary type, a recurring figure of the imagination. He returns age after age in various guises to remind audiences of their own literacy, for to laugh at the clown is to celebrate one's own consciousness of the problem of language.

AGAMEMNON AND THE PHYSICAL BASIS OF LITERACY

My third type of fundamental illiterate is Homer's Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks against Troy. Several years ago Julian Jaynes's book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* announced that what we call consciousness was a phenomenon unknown to the Greeks of Homer's time; that the right and left hemispheres of the brain were not then neurologically related as they are now; and that certain critical mental activity occurring in the right hemisphere, which is now fodder for conscious reflection, appeared to the characters of the *Iliad* as divine and external voices completely detached from self. "The gods take the place of consciousness," Jaynes says; Agamemnon "did not have any ego whatever."

Jaynes's thesis, while indefensible, provokes a series of stimulating questions. If the voices of Agamemnon's right and left hemispheres are indeed unaware of belonging to the same mind, and if we accept the definition that he is therefore unconscious and egoless, then Agamemnon is certainly illiterate in the widest sense of the term. He is a simple automaton responding to stimuli within his own body over which he exercises no control. Nor, lacking consciousness, can he reflect on the stimuli themselves. Is this an accurate portrait of the character Homer depicts? Were the minds of Homer and the Greek heroes similarly constituted? Does the kind of literacy we have been discussing have a biological basis, as Jaynes's argument implies?

No doubt Homer's Agamemnon is a type of illiterate. From the first lines of Book I when he insults Apollo's priest Chryses he is insensitive to or unconscious of the effect his words have. He either ignores or does not hear the advice of the Greek leaders given in counsel. When Zeus sends him a false dream assuring him of easy victory, he accepts the prophecy uncritically and persuades the army to act upon it, thereby initiating the brutal and indecisive warfare of the poem. Plain-spoken Diomedes tells the king to his face that before they can reckon with the Trojans, the Greeks must deal with Agamemnon's folly. Homer's portrait of the leader of the Danaan host is by no means flattering, though it is relieved by human touches throughout: Agamemnon shows much brotherly concern for his often incompetent brother Menelaus, and elsewhere he admits his own confusion to Nestor. But Jaynes is in the main correct. Agamemnon is a man seemingly driven by voices and emotions whose source he neither knows nor cares to scrutinize. He is a robot, and even though he is a character from an age that had not yet adopted reading and writing, he may more justly be called illiterate because of his insensitivity to speech, thought, and their relation to action.

But if Agamemnon uncritically accepts false dreams, divine but misleading voices, and his own unexamined verbiage, neither Homer nor the other Greeks do. Diomedes points out the king's rhetorical weakness. Nestor, universally respected for his age and good counsel, is skeptical of any line of action dictated by a dream and accepts Agamemnon's dream only because he is the man in charge. By Book XIX, when Agamemnon apologizes to Achilles and justifies his behavior with an ornate argument that shifts the blame from himself onto Fate and the gods, the Greeks are weary of the quarrel and happy to be once again united, but Achilles has