AUTHORS' REPLY

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The response to our article "Let's Get Consistent: The Merrillville High School Writing Program" is based on four misconceptions, the first of which is partly our fault: The title suggests a broad treatment, when in reality we deal with only our standardized grading of student themes. The original title, under which we presented a program in Boston at the NCTE convention in '81 and a repeat program at Indianapolis in '82, was "Let's Get Consistent: Grading Student Themes." That, certainly, would have been clear enough for even our critic to understand. Even so, it is an unfair assumption to accuse us of being more concerned with "the product rather than the process" simply because "the article deals with the problems in grading and not with the structure" of our courses. It was not our *intention* to present a course description (but be assured we have such descriptions for each of our English Department offerings); that was NOT the scope of our article. And we used the word *program* in the title because we had been invited to publish an article for the benefit of those teachers who had heard about our "program" in Boston or in Indianapolis, and had been unable to attend. An unfortunate and ambiguous word choice, and we accept the responsibility for misleading our critic.

The second and third misconceptions upon which two additional attacks were based were a result of misreading the text. She argues that "we acknowledge [our] failure to inform a student of why his paper was evaluated as it was or 'how to avoid similar problems in the future writing efforts.' " We make no such acknowledgment. Our article claims that this weakness is inherent in holistic grading (which we use *only* for placing a student in the proper course), NOT in our method. She further argues that because we insist that "if a paper would be 'saved' by a good mark in mechanics, it is the reader's responsibility to mark

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the content grade sufficiently low so that a student will not be deluded into thinking that he has written a paper of passing quality," we are falling back on "the traditional method of emphasizing mechanics." Don't you see that we are *fighting* that very problem? We are placing *equal* emphasis on content *and* mechanics by telling the student "the grammar is pretty good, but you haven't *said* anything relevant, so this is not a passing paper."

Finally, her misconception that this is a "familiar method" which has been "repeated often" and is destined for failure because it is not "student oriented" must be addressed. Have no fear about how well the Merrillville students learn to write under this GRADING method (please note this is ONLY our grading method, not our method of instruction: we actually DO TEACH the elements we look for in student themes). We were recently cited by Indiana University as one of the twenty outstanding high schools in the state in preparing students for college writing. What could be more "student oriented"? The fact that our students are graded fairly, regardless of which member of the department graded their paper, certainly makes this a "student oriented" program. And while our method may be familiar and oft repeated ON PAPER, it is seldom put into practice. That's why we need the inservice workshops! To paraphrase, not irreverently, from G. K Chesterton: Consistency in grading has not been tried and found wanting; it has not been tried at all.

LITERACY RECONSIDERED, FOR BETTER AND WORSE:
A REVIEW/ESSAY

ALAN LUTKUS

Robert Pattison, *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* (New York: Oxford, 1982).

Buy this book — really two books, a bad and a *very* good one. For the bad book, skip over a few pages of this review and read about *OL's* final third, which pleasantly analyzes a present literacy crisis, then tries to solve it with no knowledge of relevant linguistic, composition, or reading theory.

For the very good book, start here. *OL's* reevaluation of the meaning of literacy in history makes a difference. It counter-balances two easy equations made in the received view of literacy, one between literacy and writing, the other between writing (or print) and revolutions in thought. The differences have practical applications. David R. Olson, for instance, makes both equations, and his theory of text and utterance has begun to be a force behind some contemporary composition theory.[1]

The linguistic and cultural arrogance of the received view of literacy is remarkable, though generally unremarked. Commentators go tipsy over the importance of the alphabet — it opens the way for abstraction, for instance;[2] and lets a rosy amnesia come over what they know of the linguistic consensus on the primacy of speech. Letters become thought and so Good; talking becomes passe and so Bad. A Western bias tailors the evidence — what does not support what we do (and do now) gets short shrift. Forget, then, the Chinese experience, thought without

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alphabet. Forget that not all Greeks took to writing — Spartans didn't, whatever our supposed cultural progenitors the Athenians did. And you must if you want to save the received view forget that talky Sparta beat scripted Athens in their confrontation. But it's nasty to say that writing does not translate into power.

OL forgets none of these things. It lets literacy free from its forced ties with the development of writing; it is representative in mentioning that Cicero, within a culture that certainly wrote, still used *litterarius* to mean "best able to speak." In *OL,* literacy takes many forms, each dependent on a culture's attitude toward language, and only some of which involve the written word. In this view, Homer's failure to write does not make him an illiterate — no need to halfbury his intelligence under a cloud of pronouncements about oral formulae to aid memory, as if the *Iliad* were patched together from random clichés. Rather, Homer is literate; and his poems are about literacy — for his culture, the organization of speech for political purposes. The *Iliad's* Agamemnon illustrates the human capacity to resist literacy. The *Odyssey* celebrates literate man, in Odysseus, and not incidentally in Telemachus, the prototype of a man forging an identity without writing, the tool the received theory of literacy finds pre-eminently requisite to establishment of a self. *OL* needs more detail here (often does) but I should think the point made in one memorable contrast: at the agora, Telemachus' mistake in telling his suitor-enemies his problems; at the bow trial, his ironic posturing as the allthumbs son so his father can get the bow. It is a hiding behind language perfectly representing the prevailing mode of literacy for the house of Odysseus, deception for a political goal.

Before proceeding, two problems, one real, one spurious in this part of the book. I am queasy about *OL's* tendency to overgeneralize about cultural attitudes. Nobody knows very much about anything in Homer's culture; I know too little about Sparta to say if another attitude toward language existed or mattered; with cultures I do know slightly, difficulties can multiply. *OL* is breathlessly quick in postulating a British zeal for language puzzles. Established for King Alfred's time through an Old English riddle, the predilection is immediately Hail-Maryed over a millenium: "The *Times* crossword puzzle and the decoding of the Germans' Ultra secrets are in descent from this tradition of

literacy" (p.92). Might be. Might also be that both are in the great British tradition of theft (India; the sonnet), the first from Poe ("Gold Bug"), the second through Poles (who after all swiped the decoding machine from the Germans). I'm willing to pay the intellectual price for a new theory of literacy; but the price is high. The spurious problem is in source material — it is quite true that Julian Jaynes's woolily unreliable *Origin of Consciousness* lies behind *OL's* Agamemnon becoming non-literate (Jaynes's was non-conscious). I am not bothered. *OL's* analysis holds. Problems are normally qualified in the useful bibliographic short essays; the one for this chapter suggests two solid works as antidotes to Jaynes. For *OL's* historical sections, Pattison has read everything and a half, putting it together wittily and winningly, so that in the seven pages between Cicero's and Agamemnon's appearances, one is tellingly engaged by (in order) John Connally, Charles the Bald, the Wild Boy of Aveyron, Helen Keller, George Burns and Gracie Allen; and not an irrelevant walk-on in the bunch.

Equal in importance to *OL's* theory of oral literacy is its establishment that, despite the received view, writing in and of itself has no necessary consequences. Rather, a culture's attitude toward language determines the uses made of writing. Hebrew culture, reverencing the Word, does not share the attitudes of Athens, and among the consequences in the Old Testament are its contradictions, since the Hebrew attitude does not allow one orally transmitted tradition to supersede another just because they conflict. Again *OL* needs detail — I take it the inclusion of both the seven-by-seven and two-by-two tradition for animals on the ark qualifies (Gen 7:2-9). Hard to imagine an Athenian putting up with this — recall Socrates tossing out inconvenient lines from Homer in the *Republic.* Parallels and corollaries apply to modern societies. We (and Shah Palevi) assumed writing literacy would bring Iran into the Western camp. Not so — a 70% literacy rate did not prevent return to Moslem fundamentalism.

In *OL,* the advent of printing also has no necessary consequences. Again, cultural attitudes simply put print at their service. Here interest focuses on two attitudes, both pan-European and deeply rooted. One, traceable to Rome, is language used for power and efficiency, increasingly associated with writing (even by 100 B. C., all Roman citizen-soldiers had to have writing literacy). The attitude is marked

by its emphasis on rules for uniformity (the Emperor Augustus sacked one bureaucrat for misspelling *ipsi*), again increasingly, as written Latin departs farther and farther from spoken vernaculars; rules are far more necessary by the time the Medieval Church adopts Latin as its administrative language. *OL* establishes that print continues this rule-tradition (among others) — Donatus' Latin grammar is among Gutenberg's first printed books. And so much for the received view that print is causal to bringing rule-governedness to the West. And two other effects often ascribed to print, capitalism and growing numbers of reader/writers, also seem rather to precede print, and again involve the attitude of language for power. That perpetually rising middle class really does rise and involve itself in the writing of contracts in 1100-1400, what *OL* calls "the age of written record" (p. 97) — an age when writing itself began to suggest money ("scrivener" is a medieval synonym for "usurer"). That class perpetuates its interests later, through the printing press.

The second deep attitude resists the first, *OL* finding it largely oral, though partly adapted to writing before print. This tradition holds that language is truth, stemming from the primitive Church, initially almost entirely oral — Jesus did not publish; the Apostles spread the Word through speech. Even adopting writing, the Church at first kept its oral emphasis: Early Church Fathers mistrusted the rule-oriented artifices of rhetoric, in writing or speech; record-keeping was not in the language of power but in a popular dialect, the *koine.* In time the primitive Church attitude channeled into continued place for vernacular in the mass (even as the Church hierarchy adopted Latin); the vernacular tradition is sustained, appearing later in writing, particularly in the 1300's Lollard translation and dissemination of an English Bible in manuscript — again, pre-print. *OL* suggests it had only some readers — significantly, the government responded by licensing preaching, not writing — and only still later, particularly in (post-print) Protestantism, would this tradition develop its own readers, able to respond themselves to the Word (and later for *OL,* any words) as the truth. Nonetheless, the attitude that language is truth had challenged existing authority in writing before the printing press. So much, then, for any received view that the printing press created Protestantism.

OL's final third parallels America with early medieval Europe, two attitudes, two literacies — still largely oral and print-opposed. But now neither literacy is convincing to me.

The oral form — the "new literacy" in America — is better argued, including student speech, television and rock music — a language of feeling (*OL's* emphasis in medieval oral culture), marked not by ignorance but by characteristically oral talents. Unfortunately, this discussion is anecdotal (oral talents = Pattison's students' abilities in memorizing rock lyrics) and highly impressionistic. *OL's* position is further hurt by the recent rapid fall-off in record sales with the growing popularity of arcade games, less oral than visual. The visual component of television also lacks analysis: Critics of TV are roasted with a strawman strategy, made to mouth dismissible idiocies like "Anyone exposed to television for protracted periods of time is almost certain to develop narcissism, acne, and fascist tendencies" (p. 114). *OL* would be far stronger if it dealt with serious criticism — and integrated oral with visual, not only in the "new literacy" but in the old "oral" form: the medieval iconography of Chartres certainly suggests the visual exists there too, but *OL* never suggests it. The thesis should accommodate it — an attitude toward language may, as we've been told, make use of any technology. But for whatever reason, *OL* admits no complication. For the primitive Church, we have heard only one relevant Scripture, *OL* citing Matthew and going on: "'He that hath ears, let him hear,' Jesus had said, stressing the ear over the eye. It was a dictum the Church lived by" (Mt 11:15; p. 73). Jesus does say that. But he also says, close by, "The eye is the lamp of the body" (6:22) and "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (13:16).

In fact, without more subtlety, the two literacy thesis turns vacuous in America. The new literacy may link to the medieval vernacular tradition but the other, opposing, modern literacy — Standard English (SE) — is not an opponent comparable to its supposed counterpart, Latin, the *OL* claim: "I am recommending that we admit, as the medieval world did in the Carolingian reforms of 813, that we have two languages" (p. 168). But *OL* gives no serious proof (nor could it) that the two forms of English differ as, for instance, classical Latin differs in Subject-Object-Verb order from

vulgar Latin or vernacular SVO orders.[3] *OL* merely asserts comparable modern differences — "In many cases, formal English *is* a second language for students" (p. 167, *OL's* italics), going on to admit similarities in features between the supposed two modern literacies, and *still* going on to assert that the difference is so great that SE should be taught like Latin. Only once is anything remotely like a relevant example, a different syntactic property, offered (p. 162). But overall, the student samples from the new literacy differ insignificantly, once by as little as one letter and two (French) accents: "Writing courses in college should teach the student how to write a business letter and resumes, with minimal grammatical errors" (p. 177). Clearly *OL* confuses second language with second dialect and register and even with spelling — very different things.[4] The Latin-SE analogy fails on every known grounds, and with it *OL's* assertion of two modern literacies, a putative revelation that in fact reduces to what every competent grammar handbook accepts as unremarkable on every other page in formulae like "standard in informal speech . . . but many writers avoid this structure."[5]

And SE is disqualified as the language of power for a quite different reason. *OL's* reason for offering it is "economic survival" (p. 167), which by the way it suggests students should be offered as the "honest rationale" for learning it, showing that *OL* is unacquainted with any research on motivation in language learning.[6] But that motive, even on the teacher's part, ironically disqualifies SE as the language to be taught. Those in other professions in the society — the truly powerful — differ fundamentally from SE-adherents in judging what is or isn't a language error.[7] In other words, if there is a language of power, it is not SE; it is the very language *OL* abhors, that of "junior executives who can't punctuate" (p. 172).

The two literacy concept has one more, ultimately redundant, application to composition. *OL* suggests the new literacy, the oral one, probably needs its own form of writing, a matter for the classroom: "students should be encouraged to think, speak and write according to their own conceptions of literacy" (p. 168). This is a humane extension of the thesis. But its curriculum turns out to be only "personal writing," and Oxford gave us Peter Elbow's better exposition of that as free writing a decade ago.[8]

So for America's writers, *OL's* two literacies are

valueless. For its readers, the concept helps define the question of literacy crises interestingly. There are two, one mechanical, at the level of transfer of information, the other intellectual, transfer of thought. For the first, *OL* accepts (rather arbitrarily) a figure of 40% for Americans who cannot cope with all the basic documents of life. *OL* has no solution here.

For the intellectual crisis, *OL* is far better, arguing that historically something got lost in making English-for-power universally available. Giving everyone access to rules designed for efficiency and (more and more) universal social coherence was only half the original vision — *OL* traces the vision to Locke; too soon, mechanics alone substitute for mechanics-linked-to-understanding of the word. That linkage is the vision, informed with the vernacular tradition (odd for Locke, but cogently argued in *OL*). The linkage still does hold for a few — just those few *OL* finds running this country's corporations, liberal arts graduates from traditional prestige universities. There, reading still does deal with understanding; illiteracy entered one Columbia professor's classroom when undergraduates arrived ignorant of critical approaches to Aeschylus. Undergraduates elsewhere get at best imitations of prestige training, the two-semester writing-literature sequence of many second-level colleges. *OL* finds this just mechanics, the safest offering the state can make to the masses, required to be efficient, not intelligent. *OL* is then unimpressed with HEW material saying 90% can read a job-ad; the statistic measures transfer of information, not transfer of thought. *OL* searches history for a means to disseminate thought more widely, and finds it: as the Greek elite knew Homer intimately, the British Horace and Vergil, so we need wide study of some text(s) from the past, Latin, Swahili, anything.

It is a solution to a problem of reading literacy — but a strange one, because *OL* avoids reading theory. Lamentably so much reading theory bears on *OL's* opposition, the mechanical transfer of information (phoneme-to-grapheme phonics, for instance) against the transfer of thought (most psycholinguistically-based theory).[9] *OL* is silent on this; and as *OL* describes it, the solution to difficulties in the transfer of thought is par-secs irrelevant to any reading theory I know.

OL closes with a look into the rosy-dark futures of the two literacies. Rosy if they blend — possible, *OL* throughout

giving some current evidence of a sort, from terms like "tape libraries" through authors using TV for promotion to the most interesting piece, the claim that teenage heavy TV viewers tend to read more later on (p. 116, but overstated; the actual research adds "but tend to comprehend less than lighter viewers"[10]). The dark side has been prepared earlier in intimations of revolution when the second-line college graduates discover their mechanical education has kept them from the power they expected. Now, if the two literacies pull apart — "a severing of the body from the soul of our culture. It would pit class against class as well as literacy against literacy. It would be the end of the American experiment" (p. 207).

Oh my. Oh pooh. Don't stay up worrying over this impossible apocalypse. Do stay up reading the very good beginning two-thirds of *OL*.

NOTES

[1] David R. Olson, "From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing," *Harvard Educational Review,* 47 (1977), 257-281; James L. Collins, "Dialect Variation and Writing: One Problem at a Time," *EJ,* 68 (Nov. 1979), 48-51; Linda Flower, "Writer-based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *CE,* 41 (Sept. 1979), 19-37.

[2] Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), P. 189.

[3] Robin T. Lakoff, *Abstract Syntax and Latin Complementation,* M.I.T. Research Monograph No. 49 (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1968), pp. 100-101.

[4] Virginia F. Allen, "A Second Dialect is Not a Foreign Language," in *Report of the Twentieth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies,* ed. James E. Alatis (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1970).

[5] John C. Hodges and Mary E. Whitten, *Harbrace College Handbook,* 9th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982), p. 65.

[6] Wallace E. Lambert, "Psychological Aspects of Motivation in Language Learning," in *Language, Psychology, and Culture: Essays by Wallace E. Lambert,* selected by Anwar S. Dil (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1972).

[7] Maxine Hairston, "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage," *CE,* 43 (1981), 794-806.

[8] Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973).

[9] Leonard Bloomfield, "Linguistics and Reading," *Elementary English Review,* 19 (1942), 125-130, 183-186; a good summary is given in the final chapter of Frank Smith, *Psycholinguistics and Reading* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

[10] Michael Morgan, "Television Viewing and Reading: Does More Equal Better?" *JC,* 30 (1980), 159.