

5-1966

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Olson, Paul A., "Of Noon Scholars and Old Schools" (1966). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 142.  
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## OF NOON SCHOLARS AND OLD SCHOOLS\*

BY PAUL A. OLSON, *University of Nebraska*

IN THE *Parliament of Fowls*, the elder Scipio, who is a Roman officer and conqueror of Carthage, takes the younger Scipio, civil servant and little more than a common soldier, on a trip to the heavens to view the great cycles and our little world beneath the cycles, and to place our cities within the cycles and world. The point of the examination is that the younger Scipio should learn from the contemplation of natural law what we men are and how he can serve "our common profit" and so take his place among those founders and makers of the laws of commonwealths who are the most blessed of men. In Chaucer's succeeding spring dream, the same elder Scipio takes Chaucer, who is a civil servant and little more than a common squire, to a vision of the speaking together of people-birds who are working out the order of their common weal in parliament and exercising the faculty which is the natural footing of Aristotelian and medieval civil society: "Men are civil beings by nature made for speaking together (parlement) since nature makes nothing in vain and men by nature have the capacity for speech."<sup>1</sup> The point of Chaucer-the-dreamer's contemplation of the natural bird-human congregation, as it searches and finds its common weal in speaking together in the presence of Nature's order, is, I think, both that the civil servant must know what is what to serve the commonwealth and that the scholar-contemplative must, in some sense, serve the civil if he wishes to know with more than private vision. For vision based on the search for private advantage does not anywhere in Chaucer's world come to the court of Nature. I would like to suggest that Chaucer may be right, that the gates of his vision are not ivory. Their accuracy may be turned toward our present school situation and there suggest what is a reasonable relationship between the civil and the scholarly.

Remember that Chaucer's vision may be set in the context of a fourteenth-century argument carried on by Petrarch, Boccaccio, Salutati and their likes to the effect that the active ruler needs a contemplative side if he is to be good at the duties required by the active life and that the contemplative scholar and prayerman needs an active side if his contemplation is to be fully fruitful. The vision of the four-

teenth-century poets and scholars is a vision quite different from that elaborated by spokesmen for scholarship in the German tradition of the nineteenth century, whose mantle the MLA may still own and occasionally wear. My thesis is that our scholarship is the poorer for not being developed, half consciously, for a public civic reason and to serve a somewhat public civic end. The MLA's proper first concern may, as some of its memoranda have indicated, be with scholarship and its second with pedagogy; but I cannot believe this. The two cannot for a moment be separated. Could they for Socrates or Erasmus or Milton or Wittgenstein? Are not the logical structure of a discipline—the way it fits together for us—and its pedagogy, as Piaget and common sense tell us, one? And if we have not taught the world to teach our books well, may not that be because we do not fully know them—because we have done only part of the research on which we so pride ourselves?

The reordering of the curriculum in English which is going ahead now will, fortunately, not ask us to play Maecenas; the Office of Education and the large private foundations will, in their roughhouse way, do that. But we may be asked to be the younger Scipios and Chaucers, or, to put it more modestly—to be those who see, in common profit terms, the phenomena of our speaking together. If we are asked to play the active scholar's, the active contemplative's role, to be Petrarchs to Boccaccios, the temptation, particularly for the young scholar, will be either to be all-contemplative, all footnotes and pure scholarship, or all-active, all memoranda and institutes. But we will better serve the schools and we will probably be better scholars if we attend quietly to the debate which is going on in the curriculum world and relate our work to it by familiarizing ourselves as thoroughly as possible with the schools' situation, their presently half-finished new English curricula, and the scholars from which the diverse authors of these curricula have

\* An address given at the General Meeting on English in Chicago, 28 December 1965.

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from Nicolas Oresme, *Le Livre de politiques de Aristote* (n.p., 1489), Sig. aiiii<sup>v</sup>. I am indebted to Professors Knoll, Garner, and Bailey for many useful criticisms of this paper.

learned most—Chomsky and Gleason and Pike in linguistics; Wittgenstein and Austin and Piaget in philosophy and psychology; possibly Frye and Robertson in literature. Then we can continue our scholarly work, perhaps doing it a little more in relationship to what the schools are doing—perhaps with an eye to the great world, perhaps to some curriculum, not least the elementary curriculum. We ought not to deceive ourselves into believing that the curricula which we are now making, even with Federal help, are anything more than half-finished jobs. If they are to be at all respectable, we will need help in finishing them; and if they are altogether inadequate, we will need help from the scholarly community in throwing them out and making their successors. The creation of a useful curriculum requires that one know what have been the forms of speaking together in previous societies. "Our concern is speech—to understand the dialect of the Tribe," and no good scholarship is irrelevant. But some work which could be pretty clearly relevant has not been done, work whose general character and specific identity I wish to sketch lightly.

The work which I have in mind would obviously foster the creation of more meaningful curriculum sequences. Now what is basic, what probably should be basic, to the new curricula is the representing, in the right order, of the widest possible repertory of formulae of our speaking together so as to enable the student to master them. Normally we mean by learning to understand a language, the identifying of the sound and sentence signals which we use to communicate—signals which may be thought of as like parts of a code or game pieces in a game. But if our curriculum is not to be confined to the study of the forms of sounds and sentences, we will need work which, perhaps more ably than our present research, gets at the formulae of larger stretches of language, less rigorously describable ones perhaps but nonetheless important ones. For instance, we may not so much need a history of comedy or a definition of it or a picture of the abstract idea of comedy as advice concerning how we are to understand its idiom, common characters, general plot outlines, and masks as constituting a coordinated conventional language in Ancient Rome, a set of counters, through which the artist spoke; and we need to study how the idiom, the common plots, and the stage machine of Renaissance comedy constituted another different but allied idiom.

It would be well if we could communicate to the student the sense of form and convention with respect to all of the formulae of our speaking together, which, using Mr. McDavid's researches, we can communicate with respect to a piece of dialect speech. I do not mean to suggest that all literary study use a methodology derived from linguistics, but I do mean to suggest that to be useful to the newer curricula, the "ways of doing things," the idiom must be described rigorously enough so that materials can be created which will enable the student to do his own linguistic analyses or to read a comedy and, on his own, hear the music of a distant time and culture. The student should then be able to write on his own, using the available—the perhaps presently undescribed—syntax and discourse moulds. Generally the new curricula have assumed with Piaget that a student has to work out the center of a problem for himself—given just enough help to get him through the first go-round and enough clarity as to method to give him the confidence so that he can say meaningfully, if he should be so inclined, "Now I can go on with comedies or fairy tales; I know the idiom—how to read." This means that we must be clear about how we ourselves investigate language and how it may be studied and learned and about how we and people in past times have used it.

I may seem to be suggesting that study which intends a serious service to the curriculum look a little more in the direction of anthropology. Perhaps it should, although I would prefer to avoid suggesting slogans and rather try to give some examples of what I am looking for. As people organize themselves into groups, they elaborate formulae for using words—clusters of rules, conventions, usages for handling sounds, sentences, and even fictions, I think. That the shape of the games which they play with language and of the linguistic game-pieces which they employ are related, in some measure, to the way in which they organize themselves into groups is evident to the student of dialects and historical linguistics; Chaucer's bird groups as they existed outside of his *Parliament*, still sometime, in the late fourteenth century, spoke separate professional languages—Latin for clerks, French for Knights, and English for commoners. Ortega speaks of African tribes in which the sacred drums "symbolize all of the usages of their tribe and hence of their society" so that "when they see someone belonging to another tribe

they say 'That man dances to another drum,' that is, 'that man' has other beliefs, another language, other taboos and so on."<sup>2</sup> Now "other men" may dance to another literary drum too; present and historical societies tend to create language forms according to which a man may represent his ideals to his own group, may show, in Hamlet's phrases, what it is to know the features of virtue or the face of scorn, to be Hyperion or the satyr, to bear or not to bear the obligations which the group and its theogony demand that one bear. These usages are generally indirect—what I would call literary—and they, as recent UNESCO research in the visual arts indirectly suggests and as recent study in the iconology of classical and medieval-Renaissance literary art directly suggests, may not communicate to a man who dances to another drum what they seem to communicate.

I do not mean to suggest that literary customs determine an author's meaning but, rather, that they are a little like oversized sentence forms which must be known if meaning is to be had, in the same way that the grammatical function of syntactic position in English must be understood if meaning is to be got from a sentence. The conventions of which I am speaking may be closely related to the literary forms or genres as we conventionally conceive them, but to describe them we would have to analyze these genres more for the manner in which form controls meaning and suggests rhetorical intention than we generally do presently. If I may use a medieval example, a medieval reader of comedy saw a comedy as an *argumentum*, a true-seeming but unhistorical fiction which carried an exemplary meaning; however, he saw an epic, or *carmen heroicum*, as a mixed fiction combining fable and history, fable-allegory in the stories of the actions of the Gods in the heavens and of the phantasmagoria in the lower world and generally as exemplary-history in the central story of the journey and warfare of the hero. Now each of the two kinds of narrative in the epic and the one kind in comedy would appear to require its own habits of reading, habits which in turn control the patterns of meaning at the syntactic-morphological level. For instance, a Mars in the fable-allegory action means something different from a Turnus doing the same things, perhaps even described in the same words and sentences, in the historical action. And the student has to have enough help with reading the idiom to discover how the one or the other makes sense and yet little

enough help to require that he make sense of it himself. If I may give another example: I remember seeing, on BBC television, an American Western whose system for communicating I understood perfectly; but some of my older British friends did not understand it, not because they didn't understand the words but primarily because they had not had enough experience with the larger conventions and milieu of the Western to know what to take as historical, what as historical-exemplary, what as symbolic; and they rather tended to think that we in Nebraska lived a Western and literally worried about Indians and black gunmen. The shoe was next on my foot; the Western was followed by a dance sequence from Kerala in which the meanings implicit in the gestures not only were not what I would have said they were but were such that I could not conceive how they could be what they were said to be by the television commentator.

The primary or junior high school student who is asked to face the sentences and symbols of a literary work written in another culture or in past time seems to stand in the position in which I stood in relation to the Kerala dance, and too frequently, in dealing with literature which works for him, we stand in much the same position. If, as learning theory suggests, the history of a discipline and the sequence in which it is learned are in some measure allied, we must be concerned with the literature of early heroic societies and of present pre-technological ones; that literature comes first psychologically and answers to conceptions of reality which children already have. There are good psychological reasons why human roles are broad and obvious, why nature is personified, and why the moral life of man appears in stark contrasts in children's literature. What we need to understand in heroic, eidolon literature is not simply why children like it but how, beginning with its innate appeal, we can work to create, in the child, a larger knowledge of the idioms and meaningful forms used by a man who dances to another drum. Then we will have begun the process of education. Unfortunately, it is in dealing with just this literature that we are weakest as scholars. When we began to work out a kindergarten to twelfth grade literary program in Nebraska, we did not wish to be hoist with the petard which blasted the Dick and Jane people—that we hated

<sup>2</sup> José Ortega Y Gasset, *Man and People*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1957), p. 230.

anything sufficiently literary, anything good enough, to attract children. On the other hand, we wanted to avoid the Pooh perplex, the imposition of oversized critical machinery on children's stories. Our teachers did hope to comprehend the structure and genre, the meaning and symbolism, the style and rhetoric of as many of the folk tales, classical myths, and epic and mock epic tales as they thought they could take to the classroom. We wanted a close historical understanding, not a nebulous psychological one. And though we did not expect students to be able to find everything discoverable in such works, we knew that, unless we had found something, we would not be able to ask questions which would lead anywhere. When we planned for the elementary classroom and sought a reasoned treatment of the folk tale, we found, in some criticism by the Russian formalists of two generations ago, descriptions which did elucidate the formal conventions in some eighteenth-century folk tales in a suggestive manner. It was not the kind of criticism which could illuminate the meaning of such a princely folk allegory as the *Woodcutter's Child*, but it was useful. When for the junior high curriculum we sought to understand the language of classical myth and its uses in the creation of an English golden world, we had to go mainly to the work of Pepin, Sez nec, Buffière, and Carcopino—to France and England. And the structure and broader linguistic strategy of Homeric-Virgilian epic from Homer to Milton seemed best described for curriculum purposes in the writing of the classical Greek commentators described by Buffière, the commentary of Servius, and the criticism of Renaissance commentators involved in the Aristotle controversy, better described than in much recent genre work on the same subject. These older descriptions tell, for instance, when it makes sense to look for figurative or emblematic elements in a piece written in a Homeric mode and when it does not.

None of these kinds of scholarship is a perfect sample of the kind of analysis of system in the language of art which can profit a curriculum which endeavors to deal with the primary forms of literature, but each points in the direction and suggests how and where we might work. It is easy to suggest that one's own fellow scholars have left undone things which they ought to have done; let me say then that much of the best scholarship upon which we were able to build, particularly for the senior high school, is American literary scholarship. But

one is tempted to feel that our elementary and junior high school teachers have few obvious places in this country to turn if they wish for a rigorous historical scholarship and criticism relevant to many of the works which they can profitably teach. Where would they go now if they sought for guidance to help plan the teaching of English-language literature written for the drums of Asian and African cultures, a subject which will become very important in the schools in the next ten years? It is, I think, an injustice to suggest that teachers at these levels have despised the literature which they can teach and discouraged us from working on it. They seek help. But we who form the academy's literary interests may have developed a concern for a somewhat narrower shelf of literature than is necessary or we may express our broader concerns for the idiom of art in ways that do not help the schools. The books we read and love often avoid the exploiting of the verbal devices which come to students "with a tale forsooth, with a tale which holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner." We seem to want to come lugging cases of ambiguity and speaking the crabbed tongue. If we do research on heroic literature, as we sometimes do, we work primarily with sources and philology and secondarily with such matters as generic meaning or translating. But if we wish to speak to the schools, we will certainly need a profound and non-speculative study of the meaning of past and present myth in the broadest sense, of its relationship to the belief and practice of the people who make it, a study at least as good as the best form criticism of the Bible; and with this, we will need a vigorous and historical genre criticism which tells us not *that* form is a convention mediating meaning but *how* it is.

My first concern is that all of the resources of language, including those essential to literary language, be represented in the curriculum. I am concerned lest the vigor and rigor of present studies in linguistics leave us with a curriculum beautifully coherent, carefully structured, and ultimately out of touch with some of our richest linguistic resources because our descriptive schemes do not accommodate them. My second great concern is related: that, in studying our speaking together, we study not only the mechanics of our speaking but its possible abuse. I have no doubt that present work with sounds and letters, sentences and parts of sentences, and historical or dialectal mutations of these will create for us adequate and—to borrow a

scientist's phrase—elegant grammars, each possessing advantages and disadvantages implicit in its initial way of conceiving linguistic phenomena. With this should come seminal research into reading, spelling, prosody, stylistics, the syntactics of literature, and the stylistics of the sentence and paragraph; and English departments which care for the foundations as well as for the towers of learning will do the linguistic research bearing on pedagogy and press its implications for teaching at all levels, not least for the teaching of the very young. But our language and composition study ought to teach students to ask questions which go beyond asking what the instruments are which they can use; they ought also to be taught to ask how they can use these instruments with discipline. If the student needs to know the transformations or syntactic structures available to him, he needs also to know where to ask, "How is what I am saying meaningful—in what context?" "What kind of logical usage am I using or abusing, and am I confusing language games and uttering nonsense?" We do not need to fear that classroom poets and tellers of fairy tales will be bewitched by their own tales—as the classical line puts it, they never pretend to literal truth telling. But we do need to fear lest classroom essayists be bewitched by the nonsense of their words when they are not telling tales. Since linguistic theory seems to have moved on to questions which had, until recently, been considered the province of philosophy—the question of the relationship between the meaning of a word and its referent, the question of the relationship between a proposition and what is distinguished as the grammatical formulation of the proposition, the question of the leading analogy according to which language is to be regarded—one is tempted to suggest that it would be well if it attended to the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the leading philosophic work of our time dealing with these questions. But it is the composition student and teacher who is most likely to profit from materials which would make him concentrate on making, at his own level, Wittgenstein's kind of examination of the logic of ordinary language. A linguistic rhetoric will generally not help a student to be clearer about whether or not he has made sense; Humpty-Dumpty's syntax is as good as yours and mine. We do not need what philosophers from Wilkins and Leibniz to Russell and Feigl have told us that we need to keep us from Humpty-Dumptyism—a real

character and philosophic language. Ordinary English is all right for all of our work. But both we and the school's students of composition probably do need help from philosophers who deal with language—in acquiring a sense for the difference between statements concerning which it is appropriate to ask whether they are true or false and statements concerning which it is appropriate to ask whether they are sense or nonsense. To paraphrase my friend, O. K. Bouwsma, as he put it in his review of the *Blue Books*, "If we read Wittgenstein's books as we read most books, nothing whatsoever will happen to us and it won't take long . . . If we read them diligently digging as we are used to digging . . . coming up with a shining truth here and a nice bristling idea there, we will have got him all wrong and we will go home full of indigestibles, worse now than when we came . . . four or five misunderstandings worse . . . But if we take time to stew in these books or let them stew in us, if with a bit of luck they cling to us like a bramble and they should hurt and sting and all the while the agitation should keep us alert, then inkling by inkling, glimpse by glimpse . . . on the first day ten years later, we will return home a different man than we came."<sup>3</sup> Part of the teaching of composition ought probably to direct itself, perhaps from a fairly early time, to the teaching of this kind of "grammar," to the developing of the feel for the kind of tool—logical or nonsensical—we have in a word, a phrase, a set of locutions used in a certain context. Discussion will be necessary, and hard work and listening and watching for the fly in the bottle, and we may not return home better masters of the mother tongue. But the civic contexts for which Aristotle wrote have gone, the classical oration is no longer a firm mould, the Greek and Roman sense of decorum has been pushed aside by new sets of linguistic manners and the ancient enthymemic logic does not help. We need all the help we can get, and we need it not only for the grammatical formulae of our writing but for its sense.

These then are some specific, though not exclusive or necessary, examples of research activities which I have come to regard as necessary to a sound pure scholarship and a sound curriculum scholarship, to the health of our speaking together.

Once the scholar sat as the center of the school, and one of the saddest remarks in Aries'

<sup>3</sup> O. K. Bouwsma, *Philosophical Essays* (Lincoln, Neb., 1965), pp. 199–200.

brilliant history of childhood is his remark characterizing a development of late Renaissance-Enlightenment education. "As the average age of the pupils dropped, the master giving instruction in the arts in the secondary schools stopped being a scholar and thinker, a dialectician, a logician famed for the originality of his thought and became a pedagogue, a pedant, a mere labourer treated with scant respect."<sup>4</sup> The process of research and inquiry can only be embodied for students by teachers who are inquiring; and, if a sound curriculum movement is going to require that we broaden the subject matter of our research so that we hear the duck speaking as well as the eagle, it is also going to require that the duck be allowed to speak to the eagle, that we consider the reorganization of our academic group with the expectation that some of our best scholars work in the schools, in the public schools and particularly in the elementary schools, taking up and broadening the tradition of the men of the twelfth century or of a distinguished line at St. Paul's or of the Thomas Johnsons of our time. We should aspire to be scholars of the old ten o'clock school. We did not always come at noon. We may expect secondary and elementary school teachers to be working beside us as research people and to put in one-fifth to one-third of our own time on the active side. New

degrees and new courses for elementary and secondary scholars and for scholars in our departments should come not because we feel a condescending need to help the schools but because the present state of knowledge in English requires richer degrees. We should expect to expand heavily our appointments of scholars to do the work-a-day jobs in linguistics and composition. For the business of the present curriculum change may partly be to remind us that we can be at home with our kind of dialect and our kind of ordinary language; it may partly be to remind us that men in other times, without half so much help from our kind of research, were at home with the makers of fiction. We may not succeed in making anyone more at home, but we can try; or, as one of the first-grade students in one of our cognitive studies put it, "Well if you were walking and you wanted to fall down, it would be foolish to fall down if you wanted to . . . on purpose, if you wanted to . . ." This paper is a kind of footnote to the understanding of Chaucer which I began to acquire from another Chaucerian with whom I studied at Princeton; he also first reminded me that scholars might properly worry about schools.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (London, 1962), p. 152.