

# The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Volume Five, Number Nine

December, 1981

## Let Something You Dismay

**W**e sent a junior member of our staff to Racine to take part in a conference about illiteracy in the schools. Conferers convened from all parts of the country, and from every branch of the service engaged in the Great War against Illiteracy. Some of them were, in fact, against illiteracy. Others were in favor of the war.

The latter, we suppose, hoped to go home armed with new inputs and feedbacks out of which to cobble some new grant proposals for new monies to pilot some new programs much, much better than the old new programs. And they probably did. Our man, however, came home suggesting that we might do better printing comic books.

On the first evening, in a brief but disquieting keynote address, Clifton Fadiman sounded what our man thought would surely prove the dominant theme of the conference. That turned out, alas, not to be so; but Mr. Fadiman's hypothesis *has* become, even more alas, the dominant theme of our conferences in the two and a half years or more that have passed since that evening.

Fadiman suggested that maybe there *is* some new thing under the sun. While education had never been a triumphant and thematic force in any time or place, he reminded those who might have been listening, neither had it ever been generally despised and rejected. Even those who *had* no education either wished for some or at least acknowledged, however

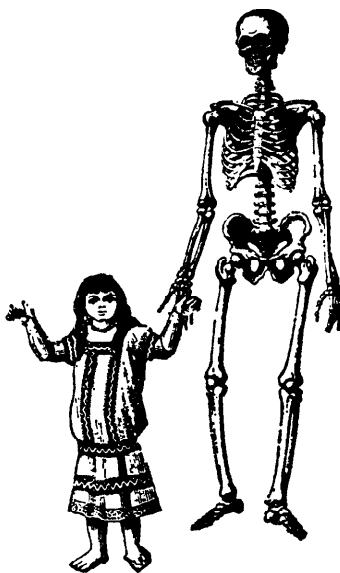
grumpily, that it was probably all right for *somebody* to have some. Education has traditionally been held a Good Thing rather than a Bad Thing. And, leaving aside the occasional crackpot, no one seems to have taken the view that there shouldn't *be* any such thing as education.

But now, Fadiman had come to suspect, an enemy had appeared on the field, an enemy heavily armed, cunning and determined, an Attila of Ignorance ushering in the decline and fall of the always shaky empire of the mind.

That hypothesis, which Mr. Fadiman may not have expressed quite so luridly, seemed to us both provocative and plausible, however expressed. It seemed a possible

explanation for the prevalence of some general conditions and attitudes in the schools, often supposed to have something to do with education, which are utterly unlike anything we have seen in the past. We find in students, teachers, and especially in the devisers of doctrine and makers of policy, automatic ideas and habits of mind as unprecedented as they are astonishing. They are ideas and habits so unlikely, even perverse, that they could hardly have just *come about* in the natural course of events. It does seem reasonable, therefore, to guess that they were *brought about*.

Consider ignorance. Ignorance, even in the schools, is neither unprecedented nor astonishing, and certainly no cause for the wringing of hands. (Cont. on p. 4)





HERE AT GLASSBORO STATE, we have no language requirements. Nor do we have any *foreign* language requirements. This may seem strange to someone out in the world, but most of us think it a very good and proper thing. In fact, to suggest the possibility of a language requirement around here is like asking for a bacon sandwich at a bar mitzvah in Brooklyn.

There are—let's face it—certain subjects that are just not suitable for study in the schools, and one of them is foreign language. The study of *any* foreign language is an egregiously un-humanistic enterprise in which even *good* students can actually make an indubitable *error*! That's humiliating and undemocratic. The students who make many errors will suffer regular and irretrievable diminutions of self-esteem, and those who make only a few will stand in danger of becoming elitists. Those are risks that we can not and *will* not take, especially with all those earnest young people who truly love children and, resisting the lure of the lucrative but inhumane careers that they might have found in commerce and technology, have come to us to be made into *professionals* of schoolteaching.

And fortunately, while we do still *permit* the study of a few foreign languages here, we find that most of our incipient schoolteachers don't even *need* to be advised to choose Puppetry Workshop or the History of Jazz rather than French or German as what we call "humanities electives." *They* know a humanity when they see one.

There's nothing humane about irregular verbs, and an obsession with foreign language is even more dehuman-

izing for the teachers than for the students. The teachers are supposed to *know* the irregular verbs. And the case endings—*all* of them. And the use of the imperfect subjunctive. And thousands of unamerican idioms. You can be pretty damn sure that any teacher who is actually an *expert* in some foreign language has put more effort into rote learning than into relating to self and others, and will almost certainly be more interested in the mere facts of a narrow discipline of dubious relevance than in the

*true* goals of education: appreciation, awareness, global and/or environmental consciousness, and rap sessions on death and Gay Rights. We are not the least bit interested in turning out *that* sort of teacher, thank you.

And furthermore, these people who indulge in foreign language study often pick up some uppity, anti-social notions about *language itself*. They start getting persnickety about what they are pleased to call "accuracy," and they snootily pretend that they **can't** understand what it means to **experientially enhance some aspects of remediation implementation in the**

sphere of interpersonal communication, which tells you how little they really **care about self-expression and creativity, a couple of our other true goals.**

But **there's nothing to worry about.** Our Division of *Professional Studies*—an *airborn* division at that—will see to it that **there is never** a foreign language requirement *here*. **Why, just last year,** when our little foreign language department **proposed** a few reading courses that just *might*, some day, be required by a couple of other little departments with no discernible future and thus

THE  
LEARNING  
TOWER  
OF  
BABEL

A LITTLE HEAVY THINKING

from

Gerald W. Brown  
Professor of Education  
California State University

How can we justify eight years of study of a foreign language when the foreign travel of the student may (probably ten years later) be in an entirely different sphere?

How can we justify intensive study of a foreign language when our 'track record' in achieving fluency is so poor?

How can we justify the study of foreign language when such a large percentage of

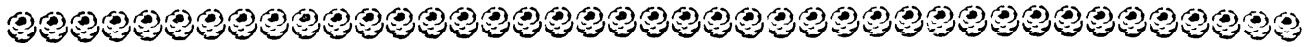
our population never meets up with a native speaker? Not only does the student get no practice, but also he acquires no motivation.

Some attention should be given to [the] claim that the failure to study a foreign language is [a] detriment to international understanding. Although such a statement would be difficult to demonstrate one way or the other, it is difficult to see how a knowledge of French would help understanding of the international situation in China, Japan, etc.

In my own sphere the people who are multilingual do not stand out as having

a significant international understanding nor as educated men. I admit that monolingualism may be bad for business, and business may very well provide opportunities for their employees to learn, in a commercial language school, the specific language they need at the specific time they need it. Three essentials of language study come together at that point: (1) an able learner, (2) motivation to study, and (3) a ready opportunity to put the study into practice.

As for teaching every student in our schools and colleges a second language, how are we doing with English?



# Dismay continues

It is depressing, of course, when those few students who fancy that they have heard of the Laws of Motion also presume that they have something to do with football. And the heart sinks when no one in a class of college seniors can describe Fascism, locate Viet Nam, name a *third* poet to rank with Robert Frost and Rod McKuan, list the Protestant Reformation and the Napoleonic Wars in chronological order, or even recognize certain words such as "heirarchy," "epigram," or "clamor." But all that, however late in the day, could be fixed.

However, the fixing is unlikely when those who don't know, and don't know that they don't know, also can't for the life of them imagine why they *should* know anything unrelated to their "needs," which turn out to be conveniently small. It is as though an ordinary, natural human propensity, the desire to know and even to understand, has been eradicated in them. It is not out of *that* desire that they come seeking "education," which is just the name of a process that causes diplomas. What idea of "education" do they have, and where did they get it?

We do know the answer to the second part of that question. They got it in school. That's where they've been all these years. And please don't tell us that they got it from their parents and peers, or from that wonderfully convenient culprit, "society." Where do you think their parents and peers got it? How do you suppose "society" came to be what it is? Who taught us that awareness is better (and easier) than knowledge, and that appreciation is better (and easier) than understanding? And who

equates literacy with basic minimum competence, and rapping with thoughtful inquiry? Who says that schools are better than ever and proves it by counting diplomas?

Fadiman was right. There *is* an enemy of education, an enemy bristling with methods and materials, and even activities kits, sweeping all before it with programmatic thrusts and film-strip projectors.

But Fadiman was also wrong, or at least incomprehensive. Yes, the enemy is on field, running amok, but it has in fact won no battles, for the simple reason that there haven't yet *been* any battles. Those trampled crops and smoldering ruins, those disquietingly undersized corpses rotting in the streets, are neither the results of warfare nor the victories of a disciplined army. They are pillage and rapine, random depredations committed *en passant* by a mindless and leaderless rabble made up of people who may have heard of things like epistemology and logical fallacies and even the scientific method but can't for the life of them figure out why they should have to understand such things. But there can be no battles until the *other* army appears on the field.

But don't bother to listen for the neighing of its steeds just yet. Those who could, someday, consider beginning to prepare for battle all live in **secure** citadels. (They never did care much for the **country folk**, anyway.) They will think their duty done if they can just manage to prevent under-employed professors of educationism from seizing all the required courses. All they care to know of tactics is how to fake student outcomes and behavioral objectives so that they can sneak their own proposals through curriculum committees dominated by fifth-columnists, and past elementary-school administrators retreaded as academic vice-presidents. The day of battle is far off.



Nevertheless,  
we wish you all  
as merry a season as possible,  
and a better New Year,  
from, and in spite of,  
*The Underground Grammarian*