## The Sleep of Endymion: On Teaching English

The following is a chapter of a never-finished book, tentatively titled “Super-Prof Among the Teeny-boppers,” based on my experiences teaching English at Newport High School in Bellevue, Washington in 1971-72.

> ˈ*săm·ple* A portion, piece, or segment regarded as representative of a whole (*AHD*)

The stuff of reality comes in on us in bits and pieces, and it goes out from us as wholes and systems. Consider that part of our reality represented by our visual imagery: Of all the potential information out there, our eyes can sample only a tiny part. We do not see x-rays and ultra-violet, for instance, nor do we see things blocked for us because of the laws of perspective and optics. From this very partial sample we always take another sample even more partial, as we register and record only that information necessary to project a recognizable and reasonable visual image. It has probably been a long time, for instance, since any of us really **looked** at our left thumb: We see just enough to allow us to recognize and identify it – and normally we see no more of it than that, yet we are reasonably assured that the whole thumb is there as part of our reality. All of our experienced reality is like that: a whole system put together from a sample of a sample of a sample.

But we find it very easy to let this sample become something other than an arbitrary representative of the whole: It becomes for us the whole itself. Probably efficiency – and the need to stay sane amidst the commonsense demands of everyday life – require that we confuse sample for whole. But the fact remains that our experienced reality must always be a sample; it must always be a part used to represent an inscrutable whole. "I do not know what reality is," says the Nobel physicist Erwin Schrödinger, "but I do know that if we can think it, it is wrong." Over two thousand years ago the Chinese sage Lao Tzu opened his *Way of Life,* the basic text of Taoism, by saying that "The way that can be spoken is not the true way." Herein,

perhaps, lies the greatest virtue of the samples of reality offered by that thing we call myth. Like music and mathematics, myth can represent reality without speaking or thinking it directly. It samples through implication rather than explication. And thus it can escape the limits of comprehension set down by Lao Tzu and Schrödinger.

Consider, for instance, the myth of the man-child Endymion:

> One night as the handsome Endymion was lying asleep in a mountain cave, Selene, the goddess of the moon, saw him and fell desperately in love with him. They loved one another for we know not how long, but in time Endymion returned to the cave to sleep again, this time forever. Different reasons have been given for this sleep. Some say that when offered the choice of whatever in life he wanted, he chose sleep rather than action, preferring to sleep forever so as to avoid growing old. Others say that after bearing him fifty daughters, Selene found his passion and virility too much and chose to stun his powers with eternal sleep, so that she could come to him in the night, lie quietly by his side and kiss him sweetly. And others say that Zeus had come to suspect Endymion of a liaison with Hera and had brought the stupefying sleep down upon him. But whoever the agent and whatever the motive, still Endymion sleeps, stupefied in the gloom of his cave, visited only occasionally by a soft touch of cold, pale moonlight,

A myth such as this can help us sample our reality in new ways. Endymion asleep in his cave represents passivity in cavernous darkness where there could have been action and choice on the fields of light. He represents trivial certainty where there could have been living freedom and luminous uncertainty. He finally represents stupidity and cowardice. Whatever the causes of Endymion's eternal sleep – whether he sleeps out of youthful vanity, or because of Selene's desire to keep things easy and sweet, or Zeus' desire to maintain the status quo – his sleep and its various possible causes have a curious relevance to the high school student of today.

Some students just literally sleep through class, probably the most obvious and understandable – and least harmful – form for their sleep to take. Only slightly less obvious and understandable, though infinitely more dangerous, is that kind of sleep and darkness that comes from drugs – the limp body, the unseeing stare, the uncomprehending smile, the obscurantism. But even drugs, as dangerous and bad as they are, do not produce the true Cimmerian gloom of our schools. "Enshrouded in mist and darkness which the rays of the sun never pierce," says Homer of the Cimmerians, "the poor wretches live in one melancholy night." There is a generalized kind of benighted stupor in our schools in which blind senselessness becomes a strategy for surviving in a threatening environment. Like the man-child Endymion, sleeping his eternal sleep in his gloomy cave, our children slumber through their years of school, in their own melancholy night. In most cases after a few full and real years in the primary grades, the gloom moves in. Fullness shrinks to silhouette, reality fades to shadowy samples. Even students who "do well" with their high grades and flawless attendance are too often little more than highly skilled somnambulists. By high school most of our children are mostly sleeping most of the time – like Craig:

One day in the early spring when I was teaching high school, one of my classes and I were in the Media Center watching *The Fifth Horseman is Fear*. I looked out one of the windows, past a girl sitting there, before the window, her head bowed. Outside the window, sitting on the grass, framed by the dark casing and the bent head of the girl in silhouette, there with his back against the wall, his head in shadow and his legs and lower body in blazing sunlight, with his radio playing and his funny porkpie hat on, there sat Craig, dozing. Craig was at school. Craig pretty well slept his way through school. He was not aware of very much that went on around him that had anything at all to do with the classroom. He wasn't stupid. As a matter of fact, he was a very bright and charming boy, a very talented photographer and quite expert at shortwave radio. Nor was he a pot-head. He just "slept" at school.

There was a kind of charm, almost a sweetness, in Craig's style of sleeping, frighteningly like the charm of the lovely Endymion about to be brushed on

the cheek by Selene. But more often than not, the sleep of the young in the schools should charm us not at all. My classes were riddled with students who had withdrawn into a state of unseeing stupor, very often helped along with various kinds of drugs. When I look now, several years later, at my diary, I find the following:

> November 12th. Reflections on the week: Goods that happened--on Wednesday I was able to talk to Scott and Rebecca, my two greatest worries in the fourth period class. My pitch: 'Look, I don't know how to say this exactly, but I want to say it. I don't want you to take it as if I were getting on your back. But I want to be sure you know that I would like you to stick with the class. I think you can learn some things you might find worth knowing. If the class really begins to bother you, let me know, and we'll see what we can do to ease things off a bit.' I think it may have worked. Also, Keith got to Scott, got him writing. Alas, on Thursday Rebecca didn't show up – but at least I got my pitch made and that makes me feel better. On Thursday Scott came to class – two days in a row! – and spent the period writing, with Keith prodding him on. On Thursday I was able to make the same basic pitch to Cindy, another one of the ones I worry most about.

Now, in retrospect, that diary entry is all a little sad. The enthusiasm of that Friday afternoon was not borne out. Scott just dropped back off. Finally, even Keith, who had started strong early in the year, also began to drop off. Rebecca withdrew from school. Cindy asked to be transferred to a class taught by one of the women teachers, and I think things did not go much better for her there than they had in my class. I was not able to arouse any of them from their particular sleeps.

That kind of false dawn kept appearing: In my 7th period class was a very small and very immature boy named Greg. For the first several weeks Greg did nothing but chatter and disrupt the class. He wrote nothing. One day, I walked up to him in class and said, "Come on, Greg, we're going for a walk." There was a momentary look of shock on his face because he felt,

I'm sure, that he was on his way to the principal's office. But he fought back his grade-school fears and put on a good front as if to say that going to the principal didn't bother him at all. As he and I went out the door, he turned left. I said, "No, we're not going to the office, we're going for a walk." Another look of shock. I said, "I think we just ought to talk, and I think we could talk better if we walk outside some." So down the long hall we started and within a dozen steps, Greg, though he couldn't have been much over 4' 6" was eight or ten feet in front of me. I called him back beside me, but again by the time he had gotten down to the door at the end of the hall, he was eight or ten feet ahead of me. At the door I said, "Greg, are you ashamed to be seen walking with me?" And he said, his first words, sort of over his shoulder, "Well, it's not something a guy likes to have get around among his friends." But we walked, more or less side by side, for a few minutes. I told him that whether I wanted to or not and whether I understood what was bothering him or not, if he insisted on not doing any work at all, I would flunk him. After that Greg showed some signs of life. As a matter of fact, he started turning in funny little hunks of draft that were misspelled and sloppy and disjointed, and yet that had a narrative drive to them. In an odd, illiterate way they reminded me of Jane Austen. The dialogue had a curious old-fashioned quality about it that was made even more quaint by some of the bizarre things Greg did to the English language, its punctuation and spelling. The plot line had to do with a couple of women paddling up a river in a canoe to visit another woman who lived in a hotel. I began to get rather excited about Greg's project. I couldn't figure out how one short talk and walk could have such a dramatic effect. But he kept talking about how he always had wanted to write a novel and now he was going to do it. And he kept the draft coming in.

But one day the bubble burst: Greg slipped up and dropped the name "Nancy Drew" in his "novel." He had been plagiarizing the whole thing, with deliberate misspelling and mispunctuation. I confronted him with this and asked him why he did it. His answer was straight forward and unexpectedly convincing: I had threatened him in a way that truly frightened him. He didn't want to flunk, because his father would wreak such retribution upon him that his life would be pure hell. Plagiarism was the only way out. He

didn't look on it as cheating so much as simple survival,

I continued to cajole Greg and finally towards the end of the school year he did honestly begin to write. He wrote a number of short little fables, thinly disguised wish-fulfillment fantasies. They were delightful. We even began to make some progress with his syntax and punctuation. But perhaps most importantly Greg discovered that the other students really enjoyed what he wrote. At first I would read them to a small group of students with whom he worked, but later on he would read them aloud himself. Reading aloud was essential since very few human beings could master the combination of Greg's handwriting and spelling and syntax. But aloud the fables were hilarious to the students and very revealing. They had titles like, "The Little Boy Who Said He Was a Foot Tall but Who was Really Only 11 Inches" and this one, "The Little Boy Who Had a Dog That Could Talk," which now, long after the fact, provides an interesting variation on the Endymion-myth:

> Did you know that dogs have feelings too like when you see a dog sleeping and then you see a little boy go over to him and pick him up. What do you think a dog would say if he could talk well you are going to find out this story is about a dog that surprised the little boy. Well it was a nice summer day Tom that is the little boys name well Tom sat on the doorstep and his morn carne out and asked Tom what is the matter Tom. Well I am bored stiff. Well I think you need a dog Tom said OK lets get a big black dog ok Tom well the next day came very fast for Tom today is the day that Tom gets his dog Well it came at noon you never have ever seen someone as happy as Tom was. Well about a week after Tom had Blackey he was getting on blackeys nerve every morning blackey would be sleeping and tom would come over and wake him up it well blackey let it go for a long time but one day it was the last straw blackey jumped up and said What the Hell are you doing I would like to sleep you get it sleep. Boy did tome run outside to get his morn well he got her into his room Tom said momy my dog can talk Blackey talk Blackey said nothing at all boy did blackey teach Tom a lesson. Well you know what happy after that his morn put tome in a home for people that

need help and blackey had the longest sleep he had ever had in his life.

We could say a lot about problems with this piece – its spelling, usage, punctuation. But we might think too, about what is good about it – its imagination and wit, its compelling poetic truthfulness. Why would someone who can write this way – and take the pleasure in it that this piece shows – choose instead what had to be a self-deadening act of plagiarism? Passive survival, perhaps – a cowardice like that of Endymion, who chose to endure in eternal passivity rather than risk any of himself at all.

Many of the actions of young people in school can be seen as ways of staying asleep, Psychologists tell us that one strategy we use to stay asleep is dreaming. Dreaming allows us to incorporate noises and distractions that otherwise threaten to awaken us. Things like plagiarism in writing classes, or cheating in general, or using drugs, or cutting classes, or ignoring the class even when they are present in the room, or mechanizing and trivializing potentially valuable assignments – all such things may be something like dreaming, strategies for staying asleep, ways to avoid the risk of being aroused by the distractions of waking life, the classroom, the teacher, or the subject matter.

It seems plausible that Endymion would indeed have chosen to sleep forever rather than to grow old. Such is an attitude not at all uncommon among young people. How nice to be forever young! But the myth of Endymion leaves the question of the cause of his sleep open and thus allows us other samplings of reality: Endymion may have been put to sleep, stunned, or stupefied by Selene. I suspect that many of the sleepers in our schools sleep not because they choose to, but because the Selenes in their lives have stupefied them. Endymion's potency threatens Selene, so she locks him up, puts him into a cave, and thus she imprisons him in his own youth, keeps him the perennial child. So the feeling and heat of youth are trivialized. How appealing to sentimentalize the young man and his feelings. How much better it is to steal in and kiss him sweetly on the cheek as a beam of cool moonlight, than to encounter the very human feeling and

heat that that prettiness contains.

Many teachers, many otherwise extremely fine and dedicated teachers, become like Selene when they busy their students with tidy and innocuous little things that never allow them to stretch out to assert their own passions and virilities. Students do tend to become the kind of people they feel their teachers think they are and expect them to be. Selene-ists treat their students as if they are less capable and less mature than they can be. Thus Selenism inevitably stunts students' growth, makes them less competent, less confident and free. Treating students this way is always tempting. It's easy – and it keeps them busy. And they can learn to like it. And so can administrators and evaluators.

The current enthusiasm for things called "accountability" and "learning objectives" have done much to aggravate this drift to triviality, or Selenism. For it is very, very difficult to spell out specific objectives in advance of the act of learning without trivializing the expectations you have of your students. Non-trivial expectations are very often non-quantifiable – even very difficult to articulate in any general way. And so, too often the objectives lead inevitably to trivial, soporific activities.

It seems possible that the word *trivial* itself illustrates something like this effect. The etymological evidence is not as clear-cut as it could be, but in the Middle Ages the Latin word *trivium*, which meant literally "the place where three roads meet" (from *tri* + *via*) referred to the basic three of the seven liberal arts: grammar, logic and rhetoric. But by the Renaissance the Latin *trivia* was being used to mean something like "That which comes from the street," hence "Commonplace, ordinary, everyday." From there it was a short metaphoric hop to the modern sense of *trivial*, "Of little importance or significance, trifling." It seems hard to explain this development in meaning unless the status of grammar, logic, and rhetoric was somehow also being diminished. What had been seen as basic became the equivalent of trifling. Even more curious, insofar as *basic* implies "essential," what was originally seen as essential now became just the opposite, inessential. The trivium had become trivialized.

A large part of this trivialization shows up as our prissy preoccupation with correctness. Selene has become Miss Fidditch. And this in turn seems to be an instance of the Law of the Preponderance of the Means Over the End: "Well-adapted means to a specific end everywhere have a tendency to become independent and ends in themselves." This law was apparently first worked out by Hans Vaihinger, a German philosopher. Vaihinger saw the mind as a very well-adapted means for solving problems posed by the human organism's quest to survive. He wondered, though, why the mind persists in setting for itself hopeless questions like "What is the meaning of life?" or "What is the origin of motion?" He concluded that the mind-as-means had become an independent end in itself: “Thus,” he said, “the mind sets itself impossible problems that cannot be solved."

The radical ends of writing, and of any use of language, are always rhetorical ends – the desire either to get a meaning more clearly articulated for oneself or to communicate a meaning to another person. Some of these rhetorical ends sometimes demand correct usage and spelling as a means to their realization. But at some point in the language arts and English classroom these means, selective and specialized as they were, became independent ends in themselves. Correctness became the thing that English was about. You can say it either way: The means became the end, or the representative sample became the whole. Rhetorical ends slipped into the background – very often getting allocated, for some reason or other, to the speech department, and represented in the English classroom, if at all, by something often called "critical reading," designed to induce a kind of creative paranoia in the students so that they could defend themselves from misleading advertisements and propaganda.

After the one-time means called "correctness" had become ends in themselves, certain means were adopted to realize this new means-become-end: "You have to recognize subordinate clauses," the argument went, "in order to understand comma rules so that you can punctuate correctly." So workbooks got written in which students could learn to put subordinate clauses in square brackets – and while they were at it they might as well underline the prepositional phrases and draw circles around

the infinitives. Thus, a curriculum evolves, and the original rhetorical ends slide further away. When a specialized means such as correct usage becomes an end in itself, there is an inevitable trivialization. The focus shifts from the essential and radical rhetorical end to something less essential, more superficial. And of course when the means to that new means- become-end is itself jumped upstairs to end-dom, the trivialization increases geometrically. You move further and further from rhetorical reality. Eventually very little that goes on in the English class has much of anything to do with those original rhetorical ends. There appears to be something that we might call the Law of the Preponderance of Superficiality: "That that is easiest to teach will get taught. That that is easiest to correct and grade is easiest to teach. And that that is easiest to correct and grade is the most superficial."

It seems somehow appropriate that the word *correct* is historically related to the word *rectum*. For there is something inescapably anal about the way correctness is twitched about in the schools. In all of my years reading students' themes I can recall very few cases where a misspelling or a mispunctuation had a really serious effect upon the student's attempt to communicate something to me. Many teachers seem very fond of that perverse negative thinking wherein they weasel out every little possible ambiguity and vagueness in a sentence in order to keep the focus on the means-become-ends that they've been taught to teach. Perhaps the schools are fixated in the anal-sadistic stage.

The fact of the matter is that if you grant the student the same benefit of the doubt that you grant non-student writers, very seldom do the things that we cause to take up so much of our time in the classroom (and that parents tend to think of as "basic") really make much difference to the truly basic rhetorical ends.

Much of what I've just said probably sounds a bit quaint to many people. For in many schools – especially those in affluent suburban areas or those new ones that tend to have a fairly young staff – a reaction set in against those means-become-ends that had come to consume the curriculum. In many

other schools – especially urban ones – it's become impossible to get students to pay any attention to them at all – which unfortunately isn't in itself any great leap forward. Thus one of the greatest complaints of parents today is that their children can't spell, or don't know the seventeen or whatever rules of comma usage. The father of one of my high school students actually complained that his son didn't know how to diagram sentences a la Warriner! To the extent that the complaints of the parents are restricted to just this level, I have to side with the teachers and see the parents as representatives of the powers of Cimmerian gloom. But there is an awkward complication: The parents also complain that their children come out of school inarticulate, unable and unwilling to read or to write, very often unable or unwilling even to use the spoken language with anything like precision and grace . To the extent that those complaints are justified, they should be bruited loud and long. For schools are too expensive – in people's energies, self-concepts, time, and money – to serve their clientele so shabbily.

Apparently, the teachers' revolt against the traditional means-become-ends did not go deep enough. It did not get back to the original rhetorical ends that animate language. It simply replaced one set of specialized and ultimately rather superficial concerns with another. In an older age it might have been called "Throwing out the baby with the bath water" – although probably the baby had been thrown out long since. All we had left was tub of turbid and clammy water. In many ways this book is an attempt to fetch the baby back in.

It is difficult as yet to characterize the new means-become-ends brought in to replace the old ones. Relevancy had its day, and audio-visual aids, and even transformational grammar (remember transformational grammar?). And in some cases there seem to have been returns to something like the original rhetorical ends – as in Moffett's student-centered curriculum, for instance, or Purvis' response-centered curriculum or Simon's work in values clarification. It is important for teachers to recognize the difference – and to be able to convey this difference to taxpayers and parents – between ephemeral means-become-ends on one hand, and the lasting and radical

rhetorical ends of using one's language to symbolize human experience and to organize one's self and reality, and thus to free oneself from the bondage of mere impression. None of this questioning of the cult of correctness in the schools is meant to imply that anything goes, that free expression is the only way. The non-evaluative descriptivism apparently mis-imported from behaviorist linguistics and misconstrued Deweyism is at best limited in its usefulness. So, too, the *enfant terrible* stance of so much neoromantic educational criticism – Postman and Weingartner's "hip chic," for instance. It is not that the notion of correctness in itself is wrong; it is simply that our current notions of correctness seem to be based on an inadequate sample of reality.

We might well remember that other cave, where people mistook shadows for reality. The people of Plato's cave were overly concerned with a partial sample that had to do only with appearances, and were not at all aware of the realities. English textbooks, especially composition textbooks with titles like “The Basics of English” or “English Fundamentals” almost inevitably concern themselves with things like apostrophes and dangling participles and certain matters of usage (such as the distinction between *who* and *whom*), shadowy samples at best. Whatever the basics or the fundamentals of English might be, it seems fairly clear that they are not these trivial shadow shows.

Two recurrent themes of this book are that language entangles its users in complicated, often contending demands, and that to be correct in any useful sense of the word is to come to grips with and straighten out this tangle. Correctness is not at all the simplicity our textbooks and schools might have us believe. Nor is correctness something we want to do away with. It is something we must see as more complex than our usual sample of it. And further, we must see that even the fullest most complete notion of correctness can be only a sample of the much larger rhetorical reality. Because our current notions of correctness are based on an inadequate sample of an inadequate sample, we "correct" our students superficially and trivially. We too often worry our writing students, for instance, with questions of social etiquette blown to an obsessive importance beyond all

reason, and thereby we trivialize our subject, our efforts, and ourselves in the eyes of our students, our public, ourselves – and, in this Age of Accountability, in the eyes of the Counters. Consider the following from Wendy, one of my high school students:

> My problem is that I let things get me down too much. I'm so used to everyone I know joking around with me that I'm a little overweight or that my mouth is crooked because of my scar, or my split ends. I take it too seriously and start getting upset.

Most of the criticism we give our students, based as it is upon an inadequate notion of correctness, is on a level with those split ends that concerned Wendy so much. An adequate idea of rhetorical reality would require that we have respect – respect for what we are trying to do, for the learning our students have already done, and for the complexity of the thing we are working with – human language used by humans. Proper respect should make it harder to remain superficial and trivial. We need a respect for the complexity, even the radical uncertainty, of language. As a start we need a healthy respect for the power and subtlety of its grammar – and thus a healthy contempt for the leaky *ad hocs* and unilluminating *non sequitors* that pass for English grammar in so many of our textbooks.

But grammar describes only a part of the reality of language – the general system at work within the language viewed as an abstract code. There is another large part of language, which analyzes and tries to describe how language works within concrete and specific human situations, tries to describe how we human speakers and listeners, and writers and readers, use language to mean things to one another. That part of language is called rhetoric, and it appears to be even more complex than grammar. There is a third important part of language, too, its aesthetic, which is involved with language at play, as it were, with the physical sights and sounds and feels of language as something satisfying in themselves. But our concern in this discussion must be primarily for grammar and rhetoric, which surely provide subtlety and complexity enough.

Beyond a respect for the complexity of language, we need a respect for the learning our students have already done. It's become almost a cliche, albeit a true cliche, that the biggest single learning job each of us accomplishes is learning our native language – which we do more or less on our own, before we start school. Even our weakest students have mastered a good portion of our language's complex grammar and seemingly inscrutable rhetoric. They all know more about English than they know they know.

Finally, we need a respect for what we're trying to do: help our students expand their powers of language. We must remember that in a very real way the thing that makes humankind human is the power to create and manipulate symbols – and language is without a doubt our most complex and powerful symbol-system. To be able to take a meaning that has been heretofore unexpressed and express it through language – especially the written language – changes qualitatively and forever after the nature of that meaning. Being able to use language to express one's private meanings so that they are given the extra order and clarity that language gives them is essential to being a human being. Having language, and thus being able to express private meanings is, as the French phenomenologist Georges Gusdorf puts it, "the necessary and sufficient condition for entrance into the human world." The capacity to symbolize our experience through language is at once a great boon – and, for the teacher of language, a great burden, one to be respected.

For an adequate notion of the reality of language we need also to see what we might call "the luminosity of uncertainty." Heisenberg taught us the basic uncertainty at work in quantum mechanics. The fundamental uncertainty revealed by the mathematics of modern physics is expressed more generally in Schrödinger's comment on the unthinkability of reality. And it was anticipated by centuries of mystics, such as Lao Tzu, with his necessarily paradoxical statement that the truth cannot be spoken.

In some ways the Greek philosopher Socrates teaches us the same thing. Glenn Linder speaks of Socrates' "serene and luminous uncertainty." Socrates respected his students – and uncertainty. He seems always to

have seen samples of reality for what they are: arbitrary samples, never the whole they are used to represent. As a corrective to that fairly common picture of Socrates as a shiftless and sly old man who liked to stand around on street corners laying traps for the unwary with his sophistical arguments, we might consider the following from Francis Cornford, one of the foremost classic scholars. After a lifetime studying Greek philosophy, Cornford says that Socrates

> welcomed the company of the adolescent young. They found in him exactly what youth needs in this phase of reaction – a man whose proved courage they could respect and whose subtle intellect was always at the service of the youthful passion for argument. He would never silence their crude questionings with the superior tone of adult experience; he wanted to know all that was going on in their minds, and positively encouraged them to think for themselves on every subject, and especially about right and wrong. He always said, with manifest candour, that he was himself an inquirer, who knew nothing and had nothing to teach, but regarded every question as an open question. (Francis M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1958, p. 44.)

Whereas Socrates taught a serene and luminous uncertainty, modern schools and teachers try to teach with a certainty that can lead students to a troubled gloom:

> Good lord! I've got to get out of this damned history class. I swear it's giving me ulcers. Why do you think I sick yesterday? I was so upset about not doing a takehome test, I couldn't sleep Monday night. I like Mr. Hayes just fine, but can't seem to handle his class. It is a weakness in myself which I detest, but I can't afford to flunk 20th Century History. And I could well flunk if I don't get into a different history class. A person just keeps going, plowing on through the cotton-candy stickiness. I want to be a level-headed, decisive person. But I can't think things out well enough to get anywhere. I wonder if Mr. Hayes plans out what he says everyday.

> He just talks on and on, enthusiastic and so knowledgeable. He seems to have everything figured out for himself. Everything! I can't stand it (Denise)

Whereas a luminous uncertainty can lead to deep Socratic insights, benighted certainty can lead to gloom, It can also lead, on one hand, to so seemingly innocuous a thing as our prissy concern for correctness, and, on the other hand, to totalitarianism, to a Zeus-like use of force and violence. Endymion is as much a threat to Zeus as he was a burden to Selene, just as the young man is always a threat to the old. So it is plausible that Zeus put him to sleep in his cave. And more than one person has pointed out that schools, intentionally or not, serve to protect adults from their young. Schools become youth-ghettos that keep child-men and child-women in their places. Thus Zeus and his cohorts are protected, their jobs and their family structures. Zeus did not want to be cuckolded by youth – and neither do adults today. The freedom and autonomy of the young can frighten adults, make us excrutiatingly envious. Better to keep them asleep to protect us from them and their powers.

Albert Einstein felt the cold, hard hand of Zeus at work in the schools, demanding what he called *kadavergehorsamkeit* – "The obedience of a corpse." John, a sophomore, wrote the following in his journal one day, a pretty good example of Zeus' *kadavergehorsamkeit*:

> I got the book checked out and was ready to leave when I remembered about my library pass. So I asked the girl at the desk what I was supposed to do with my pass because I was a sophomore. She said she didn't know. So I said thanks, I'll just leave it here and if I need it I'll come back for it. And as I started to leave, the head librarian tore loose, 'Hold it right there, you!' I turned around to see what was happening and she said, 'You,' pointing at me, 'Come here.' So I went over and said, 'Yeah?' She said, 'You mean *yes*, don't you?' When someone tells me what I mean when I say something, I get pissed, so I said, 'No, I mean yeah.' She said, 'Don't you know the procedure for a sophomore to

> leave the library?' And I said, 'No, ma'am, I don't." So she said, "Well, it's time you learned.' So for the next fifteen minutes I had to listen to how to leave the library."

About three years after John's episode in the library three ex-students – John was not one of them – threw molotov cocktails into the library and burned it to the ground.

The attitude of Zeus is parodied nicely, I think, by a quotation from Ring Lardner that one of the English teachers put up on the blackboard in the faculty prep room: "'Shut up!' he explained." It was parodied, too, if unintentionally, by the English teacher who had his students read and write on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with its old anarchistic libertarian free spirit of a hero, McMurphy. Ironically enough, the teacher counted off if his students used sentence fragments or comma faults. There must be some relentless thing about the logic of the entire school set-up that more or less drives a teacher into such absurdities. I once knew a college English Department chairman who required all of her students to read Milton's "Aereopagitica" with its great defense of freedom of expression. Being required to read "Aereopagitica" is a bit of an irony in itself, but this lady humanist compounded the irony by decreeing that certain books absolutely could not be read in classes in her department.

It seems pretty clear that freedom from the cavernous gloom of our schools has to come – freedom from the heavy hand of Zeus, freedom from the cold and lifeless caress of Selene, freedom from sleep and inaction. But the evidence so far is that students themselves can't cope with much more freedom, not without very careful and sensitive help. Teachers can't be expected to cope with much more freedom in the schools – at least not before they too have been trained for freedom. One afternoon my seventh period sophomores were being unbearable, to me and to one another. Finally, angry and wishing that I were home with the bourbon, a bowl of ice, and a bottle of cold soda with little beads of water all over its outside, I began to yell at them. "Alright, goddamn it, you think you can carry on like this and turn me into a two-bit fascist. No dice. No goddamned dice. I'm

not going to let a roomful of little punks like you turn me into some sort of gestapo agent." My anger was so real, my yelling in such dramatic contrast with my normally almost inaudible monotone, and what I was saying seemed so insanely incomprehensible to them that they settled down, with some puzzled looks, and got some work done before the end of the period.

If students and teachers can't be expected to cope with more freedom, given the present state of the art, certainly administrators cannot be expected to either. Nor taxpayers and parents – perhaps them least of all. The freedom has to come, but nobody can cope with it, so we need to train for freedom. And even when and if we learn how to do that, the period of transition could be pure hell. Except to the extent that the ideas and methods talked about in this book might conduce to it, I'm not at all clear on how one trains for freedom. I'm not even sure that *trains* is the right word. In his book *The Humanity of Man*, Ralph Barton Parry defines *freedom* as simply "enlightened choice." And risking some active choosing – in a field of light – seems a good counter-image for Endymion's cavernous sleep,

Two great dragons in any quest for enlightened choice are Stupidity and Cowardice. In something like a fit of despair just before his death, the social critic and poet Paul Goodman said that when he looked into the future of American schooling, he feared that what inevitably was going to happen was that the schools would continue on and the young people would continue to get more stupid. Stupidity is an interesting thing. For one thing, it is positive and active. In this respect it is the polar opposite of ignorance, which is negative and passive. Ignorance is simply the lack of knowledge, but stupidity is a positive active force. Relentless ignorance can breed stupidity, though, and the inevitable by-product of an ongoing stupidity will be more ignorance. So the two are hooked together in a neat little reciprocity, but still they're polar opposites.

It's not really too easy to tell what stupidity is. One sense of *stupid*, echoing the Latin, is "Stunned or benumbed," as with one caught in an uncomprehending slumber. But its more usual sense has to do with slowness of apprehension and lack of sense or intelligence. We might well

distinguish between involuntary and voluntary stupidity. Involuntary stupidity entails not being able to come to know or learn – because of brain damage, for instance. This we would contrast with voluntary stupidity, which is our main concern here and which seems to involve refusing to acquire knowledge or refusing to acknowledge whatever one does know.

Another interesting and ominous thing about stupidity is that it breeds itself. Stupid parents and stupid teachers create stupid schools, and the graduates of stupid schools tend to be stupid people who grow up to be stupid parents and stupid teachers who create more stupid schools. Stupid people tend to be stupid voters who vote in leaders who very often are themselves very stupid – or clever in their ability to play to the stupidity of others. Stupid people also induce stupid entertainments and stupid levels of reporting, which produce, not surprisingly, more stupidity.

Stupidity is surely one of the dragons the schools must battle. It's probably even more important a foe than is ignorance. Whatever working on stupidity involves, it obviously must include working on ignorance, but it must get beyond ignorance. You work on stupidity, I think, by helping people see not only how much they don't know, which is a sort of humiliating and endless kind of thing anyhow, but by helping them acknowledge how much they do know. If you help them express and examine what they know, you help them evaluate their knowledge and you help them tie it in with what they experience. You kindle sparks that eventually catch to create a glow and perhaps even a flame that begins to lighten the gloom and awaken the sleeper. In a world as small and interdependent, as ecologically tight, as ours, one's personal freedoms probably do not extend far enough to include the right to be voluntarily stupid. A person's time is his own. But that does not mean that he is free to do with it anything that he likes. Consider the following somewhat aromatic analogy: One's feces is his own, but it does not follow that he is free, for instance, to dump it into a public swimming pool. Why? Because no one wants to swim in a swimming pool filled with the turds of rugged individualists. We recognize that one's shit has social impact.

Most people would agree, I think, that one is not free to use his time in a way that infringes upon the rights of others. That is a platitude, a true platitude. But the man who goes in front of you into the voting booth and casts his vote out of sheer ignorance does very strange things to your vote, which you may have tried to cast knowledgeably. The man who drives stupidly on the freeway poses a threat to everyone and everything either directly or indirectly within striking distance of him and his car. So it would seem that in a complex and crowded culture like ours where one's acts radiate out so, a person is not free to choose to be stupid.

Stupidity is one important enemy of enlightened choice. But there still remains the second – the failure of confidence, Cowardice. In *Civilization* Kenneth Clark tells us that one of the great threats to any civilization is failure of confidence. Civilization requires people who are illumined with a driving sense of confidence, confidence in themselves, in what they're doing, in their institutions. A lack of confidence is a kind of cowardice, andi cowardly people are becoming more and more dangerous. Back in the Middle Ages, perhaps, large numbers of relatively unconfident vassals and serfs posed no particular social threat because their state of mind had little to do with the civilization of which they were a part. So long as the people who were making a mark upon that civilization had confidence in what they were doing, things would hold together pretty well. But our counterpart to the serfs and vassals are the large American democratic middle class. We cannot afford to be cowardly, because for much the same reasons that stupidity breeds stupidity, these people and their attitudes do affect the tone and quality of our civilization. The American political structure, communications network, and educational system all work together in such a way that the lack of confidence of the great so-called "middle class" infects practically every aspect of American life and civilization.

So there are two very dangerous dragons to be met in any quest for enlightened choice, two things that are at once symptom and source of the sleep of Endymion: Stupidity and Cowardice. They are the two greatest dragons with which education in general must do battle. They become particularly important for language arts and English teachers who are so

much involved with helping young people master their own native language. For one's native language is such an important instrument for understanding, articulating, and creating oneself – in spite of the real limits spelled out by Schrödinger and Lao Tzu.

Whatever we do with language arts or English curriculum, it absolutely must help young people grow more confident, even brave. It must enlarge their sampling of reality. It must lead away from darkness and toward the light, away from passivity and toward action. It must speak to what the great mythologist Joseph Campbell called "the quality of Western man that is gorgeous":

> Every individual is a unique phenomenon and the task of life is to bring this uniqueness to fruition . . . We yearn for something that never was on land or sea – namely, the fulfillment of that intelligible character that only the unique individual can bring forth. This is what Schopenhauer called ‘earned character.' You bring forth what is potentially within you and no one else.

Spoken of in these terms, the issue might seem very grand. But it usually resolves itself in the classroom in understated, even mundane ways. I remember one occasion when it seemed to me that most of the students in the class had been able to use a reading and writing assignment to begin to do the kinds of things that Campbell was talking about. We read a poem called "The Pennycandy Store" by the old Beatnik Lawrence Ferlinghetti.:

> The pennycandystore behind the El
> is where I first
> fell in love
> with unreality
> Jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom
> of that September afternoon
> A cat upon the counter moved among
> the licorice sticks
> and tootsie rolls
> and Oh Boy Gum

Outside the leaves were falling as they died

A wind had blown away the sun
A girl ran in
Her hair was rainy
Her breasts were breathless in the little room

Outside the leaves were falling
and they cried
Too soon! Too soon!

We discussed it rather casually until we had more or less agreed that (1) the voice of the poem was remembering some childhood experience, (2) the candy store was associated somehow with the notion of innocent unreality, (3) the girl who comes running into the candy store was associated somehow with experience and reality, in contrast with the innocent unreality of the store itself. There seemed to be some kind of loss of innocence in the poem, with overtones of mutability and how quickly one grows old. We didn't treat it as too terribly solemn and formal. The discussion seemed to go well. Then they were to think a bit about their own "candy store" – maybe a real candy store, maybe a toy shop, treehouse, grandparents' farm – anything that represented their early innocence. I asked them to close their eyes and meditate on that – sights, sounds, smells, but mainly the feeling of the place. Then I asked them to fix on the time and the place and event that suggested to them that their candy store wasn't going to work, that it was unreal: "Get the details, meditate, call back the feel of the experience." I suggested that they might like to jot down some of their recollections but the writing was optional. Just before the end of the hour I read them, but we did not discuss, another poem, John Logan's "The Picnic," a somewhat more sentimental recollection of an event in the narrator's adolescence:

It is the picnic with Ruth in the spring.
Ruth was third on my list of seven girls
But the first two were gone (Betty) or else
Had someone (Ellen has accepted Doug).

Indian Gully the last day of school;
Girls make the lunches for the boys too.
I wrote a note to Ruth in algebra class
Day before the test.  She smiled, and nodded.
We left the cars and walked through the young corn
The shoots green as paint and the leaves like tongues
Trembling.  Beyond the fence where we stood
Some wild strawberry flowered by an elm tree
and Jack-in-the-pulpit was olive ripe.
A blackbird fled as I crossed, and showed
A spot of gold or red under its quick wing.
I held the wire for Ruth and watched the whip
Of her long, striped skirt as she followed.
Three freckles blossomed on her thin, white back
Underneath the loop where the blouse buttoned.
We went for our lunch away from the rest,
Stretched in the new grass, our heads close
Over unknown things wrapped up in wax papers.
Ruth tried for the same, I forget what it was,
And our hands were together.  She laughed,
And a breeze caught the edge of her little
Collar and the edge of her brown, loose hair
That touched my cheek.  I turned my face in-
to the gentle fall.  I saw how sweet it smelled.
She didn't move her head or take her hand
I felt a soft caving in my stomach
As at the top of the highest slide
When I had been a child, but was not afraid,
And did not know why my eyes moved with wet
As I brushed her cheek with my lips and brushed
Her lips with my own lips.  She said to me
Jack, Jack, different than I had ever heard,
Because she wasn't calling me, I think,
Or telling me.  She used my name to
Talk in another way I wanted to know.
She laughed again and then she took her hand;
I gave her what we both had touched--can't
Remember what it was, and we ate the lunch.

Afterward we walked in the small, cool creek
Our shoes off, her skirt hitched, and she smiling,
My pants rolled, and then we climbed up the high
Side of Indian Gully and looked
Where we had been, our hands together again.
It was then some bright thing came in my eyes,
Starting at the back of them and flowing
Suddenly through my head and down my arms
And stomach and my bare legs that seemed not
To stop in feet, not to feel the red earth
Of the Gully, as though we hung in a
Touch of birds. There was a word in my throat
With the feeling and I knew the first time
What it meant and I said, it's beautiful.
Yes, she said, and I felt the sound and word
In my head join the sound and word in hers
As in one name said, or in one cupped hand.
We put back on our shoes and socks and we
Sat in the grass awhile, crosslegged, under
A blowing tree, not saying anything.
And Ruth played with shells she found in the creek,
As I watched. Her small wrist which was so sweet
To me turned by her breast and the shells dropped
Green, white, blue, easily into her lap,
Passing light through themselves. She gave the pale
Shells to me, and got up and touched her hips
With her light hands, and we walked down slowly
To play the school games with the others.

After having spent their time meditating on their own individual autumn day with falling leaves crying "Too soon, too soon," hearing the Logan poem seemed to affect some of them very strongly. Afterwards no one said anything. As they filed out of the room, great hulking Stewart turned to me and said, "Boy! That was a nice poem. A good one. Really."

In the days that followed, their files of draft began to show little scenes here and there that were clearly products of their meditation upon their candy

store.  Here's an example:

> I guess I just forgot about it.  I'd really like to go back there now after thinking about it and writing about it, but different people live there now and I don't know them so I can't go sit in their back yard.  It just doesn't work that way anymore.  When you're young, it doesn't matter because you're young and just a kid.  What could you do? Well, now you're older and people still say you're a kid but you're big so you can do something bad because you're big.  That means you can destroy their property or something like that.  Well, anyway, I liked that place and I think that I will try to go back there some day.

And another example:

> At one time we had a shack called 'The Farm,' and everybody went there.  Most of the people who went there were people who were basically the same – in other words, people who did the same things.  Well, I mean people who were not straight-jock types.  And we grew vegetables and flowers.  It was quite nice, but after the crops were all in, the only thing anybody ever did was to have parties and lay around all day.  Everybody just used the place to hang out – and people started to complain, so the cops closed the place down.  Now everybody loiters in the shopping center, and we get into trouble.  But where else can we go?  Home?  Nobody wants to go home so early.  They just want to be with their friends.  So they go over to the park's parking lot and climb over the fence into the park.

And a third one, which is pretty much within the same frame of reference, this one dealing with a visit to a new housing development that was being built in the neighborhood woods:

> We walked around all the spikes, forms, bulldozers, and mud that usually accompany the building of houses; ate huckleberries and left.  It was a little sad. We could see little pink flags tied onto trees

in the forest; some of these trees I had climbed last summer.

I certainly can't claim any originality or genius for the "pennycandy store" assignment. I suspect it was more an accidental configuration of things pretty much beyond my control, but for whatever reasons, it seemed to work in way that helped the students see how the written language, both reading it and writing it, could help them towards a more enlightened, articulated sample of reality. It somehow helped them better articulate some feelings, memories, meanings, that were floating around inside of them. There's a curious sense in their written responses to it of the young person's discovery of mortality and the tragic. And the eternal sleeper can never know of the tragic. One student slipped this one-liner into his draft: “Before I came here to school, life to me was still awfully young.”