

James Sledd Responds

To Wendy Demko Reynoso, thanks for a generous letter, and congratula-

tions for the courage of unpopular convictions. I hope she has better luck on the West Coast than gutsy teachers on the East Coast had when they tackled the regents' examination among my fellow Crackers. White geese, it is well known, are really swans, and black swans geese.

To Thomas Farrell, first a direct answer, paragraph by Farrell's paragraph, then an explicit restatement of my own position, which he misrepresents.

Paragraph 1. The framers of the *Students' Right*, Farrell says, were "indeed inimical to the teaching of standard English," because the very phrase, *students' right to their own language*, encourages recalcitrance. Farrell simply ignores the plain content of "that infamous statement" and assumes a definition of contumacy as a student's belief that students have a right to use their own language if they so choose. Farrell believes, on the other hand, that he and others like him have the Teachers' Right to compel students to use the language which teachers think their own. What can the word *right* mean in such contexts? An adequate definition can be derived from a familiar verse which forbids us to do to our students what we wouldn't want done to us. God, or evolution, has given us free will, the power to reason and to choose; and those who forbid the exercise of that power are trying to make us untrue to our natural being. So yes, of course I "challenge the authority of schools to require *all* students to learn standard English" [emphasis added], not only because the requirement would be tyranny to some, but also because the requirement of impossibles is a flat contradiction in terms.

Paragraph 2. Sledd "insists," Farrell says, "that the only motives for requiring students to learn standard English are social in nature—related either to prestige or presumed economic advantage." Since Farrell ignores the fact that I was clearly reporting the motives alleged by the objects of my criticism, I refer him again to the essay ("Language Differences and Literary Values," *CE*, 38 [1976], 234-241) in which I risked a plea for "a loved and respected language of literary tradition, the language not of a privileged class but of an educated class, a socially conscious and conscientious class." He would have found there, as a main argument, the assertion that "without memory of the past and hope for the future . . . , our present is brutally diminished; and the chain that links our ties is language, the symbol of community" (pp. 236-237). But that same argument applies as well for blacks as whites, and neither Farrell nor I have the right to demand that our pupils break that chain of community and identity.

Paragraphs 3-5. The center of Farrell's contention has been stated more fully in "IQ and Standard English" (cited above), and his argument is altogether different from those that I was answering. I was responding to teachers who would demand a standard dialect from all their students even though they believe, as linguistic relativists, that the linguistic forms which they thus demand are arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and intrinsically insignificant. Farrell is anything but a linguistic relativist. To him the "grapholect" is intrinsically superior to nonstandard dialects, especially to the dialect (or dialects) of poor black city-dwellers, so that his judgment on

the black student from the ghetto might almost be stated, "Black child, you don't think good 'cause you talk bad." In fact, Farrell is one of the people who believe, as Geneva Smitherman has said, "that people who talk Black are slow, retarded and inferior to people who use standard English" (*Black English and the Education of Black Children and Youth* [Detroit: Center for Black Studies at Wayne State University, 1981], p. 12). If the *Students' Right* had never existed, Farrell's belief would guarantee him a lifelong conflict with "contumacious children."

Less openly, Farrell's hypothesis in the CCC essay goes like this: "Black children score lower than white children on IQ tests," which are "valid and reliable measures of abstract thinking" (pp. 470-471). Historically, abstract thinking developed when the ancient Greeks moved from orality to literacy after they developed their alphabet (p. 474). One result of that cognitive transformation of primitives to alphabetic literates was "the emergence of the verb 'to be,'" which is "very important because a language with only action verbs is not likely to develop propositional thinking" (p. 475). "One begins to learn propositional thinking by mastering and controlling hypotactic grammatical structures. . . . In this country, that means learning the grammar of standard English" (p. 478). But black children come from an oral culture, and oral cultures favor parataxis (pp. 473, 477, 479). "Most black ghetto children" also use nonstandard "forms of the verb 'to be'" (p. 477), which are "virtually action-verbs, not copulatives," so that such children may find the standard forms incomprehensible. They will

therefore be more capable of abstract thought "when they master the forms of standard English," including *be* and syntactic subordination. They may be helped to such mastery by oral-aural exercises like rehearsing and reading aloud "selections from William Holmes McGuffey's Eclectic Readers" (p. 480). In at least some of these oral-aural performances, it would be important to stress "enunciation," for the aim is to help black children "to interiorize the sound and sense of standard grammar and of literate thinking" (p. 480).

I see not the least reason to accept Farrell's "argument." I am sceptical of the tests, sceptical of the history (a covert glorification of white Europeans), sceptical of the causal connection between parataxis and nonstandard forms of *be* on the one hand and deficiency in abstract thought on the other, sceptical of the thought-smothering exercises which Farrell recommends. More generally, I distrust evangelical language-interventionists who don't concern themselves with the needs and wishes of the prospective readers, writers, and thinkers and who don't ask who gains or loses what, in the encompassing society, by the presence or absence of literacy and abstract thought in varying degrees. Farrell unfortunately exemplifies my statement in my recent *CE* essay that "in the United States the motives of the learners are not primary. The learners just get told" (p. 672).

Farrell, of course, must attack any defense of the *Students' Right*. He has joined the innumerable caravan of ethnocentrists who, though they may disagree wildly on such issues as linguistic relativism, agree in insisting that dominant whites are superior to

dominated blacks and that the schools must require the paratactic blacks to accept linguistic and social hypotaxis. The same ethnocentrism appears in the historians of literacy and its alleged effects on the literate mind: because white Europeans use languages which are highly standardized and alphabetically written, and because the use of such languages promotes abstract thinking, white Europeans as teachers have the Teachers' Right to coerce. It sounds like the White Man's Burden all over again.

To Farrell's hypothesis I might oppose the real belief of B. L. Whorf, whom Farrell rashly cites (*CCC*, 477). Whorf vigorously maintained that the world-wide dominance of "European tongues and thinking habits" does not

represent any superiority of type. On the contrary, it takes but little real scientific study of preliterate languages, especially those of America, to show how much more precise and finely elaborated is the system of relationships in many such tongues than is ours. By comparison with many American languages, the formal systematization of ideas in English, German, French, or Italian seems poor and jejune. ("A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities," *Language, Thought, and Reality*, John B. Carroll, ed., [Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press of MIT, 1956], pp. 65-86)

Instead of Farrell's own cited authority, in my opposition I might equally well cite direct experience. I still remember the day in the freight yards of Atlanta fifty years ago when a black fellow-worker spotted a lot of coffins being unloaded from a box car. Willie looked as if he had just been snakebit. "Hey, Jim," he said, "one o' these days you an' me gon have to climb into one o' them things." He

had reasoned just as abstractly as if he had said, "Ev'ybody gon die. Ev'ybody mean Socrates too. So Socrates he gon die." Perhaps Farrell has really managed to say no more than that people who can't read and write—can't read and write.

But authority can be found for the wildest foolishness, and all good researchers in composition know that the quotidian experience of teachers is not to be trusted. To Farrell's hypothesis I therefore prefer to oppose an abstract thought which I can hardly call my own—namely, that the most notable environmental influence on the capacity for abstract thought is social structure and one's position in it. Holding that opinion, I find the direct emphasis on the *language* of the oppressed a prudential diversion, even in attempts to make the standard language more widely available. Friends of literacy should be enemies of oppression. In the USA, however, the educational establishment supports established power, which it can be uncomfortable to resist, and majority academics are themselves infected with the sick values of the System. Hence they systematically avoid efforts to uproot the deep causes of the illiteracy which supposedly it is their duty to eliminate. Instead of attacking oppression and exploitation, they choose safe subjects for their research, and in consequence the research does quite as much to promote their own status and privilege as it does to promote literacy.

I can support those abstractions by a concrete description of the purely imaginary University of Petromega at Euston-in-the-Hills, an institution (however mythical) which I maintain is deeply representative of our higher ed-

ucation. I believe that the study of the social positions of teachers and students in such institutions would ultimately do far more for our teaching—for the cultivation of literacy as a means to human freedom—than more talk about the supposedly crippling language of ghetto blacks.

The University of Petromega, it has been decreed by the state's decision-makers, is to be "a graduate research institution of international reputation." Translated, the decree signifies the intention to use the University, not for the service of ordinary citizens (who need to be informed if they are to be free), but to provide knowledge and knowledgeable servants for government, business, industry, and the military—briefly, to maintain and increase the wealth and power of determined predators. Since governors appoint regents, regents appoint presidents, presidents appoint deans, deans appoint chairpersons, and chairpersons have an individual voice in the distribution of goodies, administration and faculty will do the Powers' will; and in particular, a research-oriented faculty—that is, a faculty whose ambition is to be the brains of the great interlocking bureaucracies—will make research and publication essential to advancement in the Profession. Good teaching, especially the good teaching of freshmen and sophomores, is not an adequate demonstration of a teacher's merit.

Given those conditions and intentions, a natural ambition of both faculty and administration is to reduce undergraduate enrollment as much as the voters will allow. More particularly, there must be a reduction in the numbers of freshmen and sophomores, who do least to feed the research-ma-

chine and may, in fact, impede it seriously; and most particularly, the enrollment of the less well-prepared freshmen must be reduced. If once these impediments do manage to enroll, they should be allowed to blunder along, without special help, until large numbers of them eventually drop out. Freshman English is remedial, not up to the level of a graduate research institution of international reputation.

Of all freshman teaching, indeed, the teaching of composition is the least to be encouraged, for without any obvious connection with science or technology, it demands a large, skilled staff of people who are willing to apply their creative energy, not to research, but to teaching ordinary freshmen to read and write. The administration will never provide the money to pay such a staff as it pays the tenured or tenurable. On the contrary, the administration will run the beginning courses on the cheap, using underpaid and overworked part-timers, even paying them (to a considerable extent) with "soft money" picked up here and there but not regularly budgeted, and holding the staff of part-timers to a minimal number, so that last-minute hiring will regularly be necessary because actual enrollment will regularly exceed wishful conservative estimates.

Yet the basic courses in the arts of literacy cannot be abolished. Abolition is a political impossibility, because there are still too many voters who want their children to learn how to read and write, if only so that these children may hope for advancement within the cupidinous System. The inescapable teaching of composition must therefore be directed more and more to the purposes of the decision-makers, who need underlings skilled in

special *forms* of literacy. Writing across the curriculum adapts the teaching of composition to the ideals and intentions of both the Powers and the Profession. Literacy for human freedom has no place among those intentions.

Indignation, however, is pointless, for the enumerated conditions cannot be changed or even acknowledged for discussion. Since they determine the logistics of teaching, it is also idle to debate logistics. Essentially, the System forbids the creation and maintenance of a humane and effective program of instruction in the arts of literacy, but because the predetermined conditions which forbid such a program are not to be debated but must be silently accepted, high-sounding talk about purely “educational considerations” can go on without obstacle and without effect. Despised composition therefore provides an escape-hatch for the trapped faculties in the humanities, like English. With enrollment down in the literary courses, research in composition (unlike the *teaching* of composition) offers a new opportunity for profitable professional careers. By the standards of the System such research may indeed have special merit, since it diverts attention from fundamental problems yet gives the impression of great activity in the cause of literacy. One can fill whole libraries with books about literacy, orality, and Plato without bringing a single frown to a regent’s face or a single insight to a freshman’s mind.

For the students at Petromega—most of them, not all—are also playing the great game of “upward mobility in the mainstream culture.” They know where the rewards are, and in a society where school-teachers (as a

school-teacher recently said) are “paid like peons and treated like dirt,” they have felt no need and formed no deep desire for the kinds of literacy which teachers of English can cultivate. Instead of independent thought and critical expression, the elders of Petromega have taught the great middle range of Anglos acquiescence, the acceptance of a way of life which for them is comfortable, the rejection of questioning and questioners. For the blacks and Hispanics, there is no great attraction in reading and writing as means to somewhat enhanced acceptability as underlings in the dominant Anglo culture—a culture still insistent on maintaining the social conditions which have bred and preserved illiteracy. The consequence is that the average entering students at Petromega, whatever their ethnic group, haven’t read much prose, and their productive linguistic skill is pretty much limited to teen-age conversation, of which they are masters.

Those qualities and conditions aren’t likely to change greatly at Petromega, whose priorities openly set graduate fellows in microelectronics and computer sciences ahead of the part-timers who teach composition; and upper-division candidates for teaching certificates in a university which makes a great fuss of its rhetoric program have been known to complain at the demand that they master a serious college-level textbook. In the margins of their students’ papers despairing teachers have often to write *Not clear, Obscure, Incomprehensible, Give reasons*. Yet these same students are not stupid, and they are hardly to be blamed for reflecting the values of the great ones of Petromega. In their world as it really is, it’s no

wonder that graduating seniors have the *distinguision* (a senior's spelling) of not knowing that *it's* means "it is" or that *affect* and *effect* are different. They do know that their parents and future employers would rather pay for a winning football team than for adequate provision for teaching the young to read and write.

To generalize again, and to get back from the great myth of Petromega to the petty reality of criticism and defense of the *Students' Right*: Literacy can't be successfully cultivated unless literacy offers the learner something that the learner really wants. The best possible prize would be the individual's responsible control over the individual's own life, but instead of freedom, our society offers dominance for the predatory few and tolerated subservience for the many. So long as that is true, the theorizing about language and literacy, the prating about rhetoric, may be profitable to the theorists but will only strengthen the obstacles to liberatory education by ignoring their existence. Our society needs revolutionary change—not the kind of revolution which President Reagan and his cronies are presently working while they denounce revolutionaries, but a genuine redistribution of power. Without power, even the freedom to speak the truth is no great freedom, for if the powerful choose to ignore truth, as they presently do, then truth will make nobody free.

Teachers shouldn't bother their heads for a minute about the *Students' Right* if these larger issues weren't involved. The issues of practice between attackers and defenders may be relatively narrow, for to the extent that students *want* to learn to write, they will inevitably move toward standard

English, which they read whenever they read, which most of their teachers write and speak or at least try to, and whose sound-letter correspondences are unchanged in writing dialect. Questions of practice may reduce to a very short list. Shall students be allowed to write in their own vocabulary and grammar as they begin to learn? Shall their deviations from standard written English be made punishable and attacked head-on? Shall their speech be left alone, or (if nonstandard written forms are to be corrected) is their speech to be corrected too? If direct correction of either written or spoken expression is to be attempted, which linguistic forms (as distinct from content and organization) are to be considered seriously deviant? Such matters would be relatively trivial if they did not involve the profound opposition of liberation to domestication in both practice and purpose.

That involvement, however, is irreversible, and wrong choices by teachers and administrators can both drive off educable students who should instead be educated and condition those who remain for spiritless submission. If I may use the popular jargon, what teachers of reading and writing try to do, in each generation, is to repeat the society's transition from orality to literacy. The trouble is, our society's transition to literacy was a transition to literacy *for a purpose*, or more accurately for a number of purposes, and high among that number was social and political domination. Standard English might justly be called lawyers' English, bureaucrats' English, bosses' English. Today, as in the past, the pressure on teachers is to make the transition to literacy *also* an initiation into the values, linguistic and other-

wise, of the ruling class which first looted and enslaved the non-white world and now threatens to destroy the human species. The demand that every student acquire productive control of standard English is thus much more than a demand for literacy. Literacy would be possible in *any* dialect (though the costs of developing non-standard dialects for all the functions of a standard language would be forbiddingly high). Literacy in the *standard* dialect would be possible without any attack on the students' own speech, which, unlike writing, is learned without formal instruction. *Both* literacy *and* productive control of standard English could be cultivated, as I would like to see them cultivated, without coercion and to the end that social coercion might be effectively resisted. We come back, as always, to the old question which F. R. Leavis used to ask in his despairing anger: What for? what for? whatever for?

It seems to me that the loud concern of the privileged to impose their language on the oppressed may make language the gravestone, not the cornerstone, of an education for freedom.

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