

THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERACY

May I, in my turn, begin by paying warm tribute to the memory of Mina Shaughnessy and expressing my great respect for her work, especially as we see it in *Errors and Expectations*. I thought Benjamin DeMott, writing in *The Nation*, captured beautifully both the local and the larger significance of that book, and I could not match him in eloquence even if, as I hope, I do in admiration. Suffice it to say that her book excited me more than any other I've read in the last twelve months.

Though my title refers to "literacy," my own competence is literary rather than linguistic. So I will assume a very broad definition of literacy and will use it to allow myself room to move around among a range of impressions, observations, and thoughts which have kept coming to me over the past two or three years and which all bear on the state of intellectual training at various levels of education and in particular on the relevance of literature to that training. The material is taken from direct experience and so is chiefly British. It is not part of a scholarly survey, historical or otherwise. No doubt such thoughts have the defects of their origins. But I will at least try to avoid that shuttling between single anecdotes and large unsubstantiated generalizations that is characteristic of so much educational writing which offers itself as based on "first-hand experience."

What I say is bound to be largely sombre, partly because it seems to me that there is much to be sombre about in this whole area and also because one remembers the matters which cause concern more than the unspectacular, steady, day-by-day good work which is still, after all, going on all around us. The bad news always seems more interesting than the good. Which is why, no doubt, Mauriac observed that the novel is one of the happier consequences of the fall of man, and why Auden remarked that goodness is unspectacular and like water rather than gin. There is in Britain now quite a steady flow of right-wing protestations that our educational

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system has come to ruin. For those of us on the Left, the situation is difficult. We may not want to accept the equally strident but contrary claims of some colleagues on our own wing. We may well feel, as I do, that beneath some of the often over-stated assertions of what we call "Black Paper" writers, there lie some justified doubts about what is happening to our educational system. It is well past the time at which the Left should itself loosen its over-rigid hold on the pieties and slogans of progressivism in education and look soberly at those issues which right-wing writers have so far largely pre-empted but not illuminated.

Before I move into the main part of my text, let me, as well as repeating that there is some good practice at all levels of the educational system (even in those "comprehensive" schools which the predominantly right-wing British press never tires of presenting as though they were no more than training grounds for the use of drugs and the practice of illicit sex), also add that, were I not chiefly concerned here with the literacy of books, I could have found some encouragement in the record of British broadcasting at its best over the last thirty years or so. I have in mind especially the achievements in current affairs coverage by both our television systems, a record which has shown that far more people are capable of following and are willing to follow serious programs on important issues than you would ever have imagined from reading our popular press. That press, as the pressures of competition for advertising increase, has narrowed and narrowed its focus, like a soft-porn photographer over-addicted to the zoom lens; so that now the number of bare nipples, sometimes in colour, on any one day in some of the newspapers exceeds the number of items about, say, world political issues. I think we'd best regard these as no longer newspapers. They do not tell us as much about the existing or potential range of interests of their readers as the television current affairs programs do. They tell us that, if newspapers narrow their focus to more and more pin-ups and sports gossip, they will feed our appetite for those things (but we do not necessarily confuse them with newspapers). For news and comments we go elsewhere, especially to broadcasts. That would be a more promising approach to the understanding of our present popular newspapers and their relations to broadcasting than one which regards them as the fallen daughters of C.P. Scott of *The Guardian*.

One other achievement of television which has also shown that the potential, imaginative and intellectual, of many of us is far greater than a glance at the news-stands would suggest is the television play. It is suffering somewhat now, chiefly because of the twin pressures of competition and rising prices. But it can still do magnificent things, and its record over

twenty years or so is superb and illuminating. It has attracted some of the best young dramatists, and for two reasons. They have seen television as a new kind of drama, not as an adaptation of theatre dramas to a small screen. They have recognized and developed the special possibilities of the medium itself and have made creative use even of its clear limitations. They have been excited also by the idea of a "theatre" which has no fixed location or fixed type of audience, which is labeled neither West End nor "for the carriage trade." They know that their plays will go into living rooms where sit people who would otherwise never in their lives see a play, who would not dream, for complicated socio-cultural reasons, of "setting foot" in a theatre, but who nevertheless can show responses, can be captured by experiences, which one might never have suspected if television hadn't come along. We are still learning this. It has long been current wisdom that the troubles in Northern Ireland are "switch-off" subjects for television viewers. Yet recently a BBC *Play For Today*, not directly about Northern Ireland but informed and affected by it, a serious and moving play, had an audience of thirteen and a half million, which is almost a quarter of our whole population.

So, if this were a wide-ranging or would-be comprehensive survey of British literacy there would be such good elements, and others, to point to. But my range here is narrower. I really want to talk about respect for the intellectual life—or the lack of respect, rather—which one finds in Britain today. I have a slightly unusual angle of entry to the subject since I have spent twenty-four years in British higher education, roughly half as a university tutor outside the walls, giving classes to volunteer adults at night anything up to sixty miles away from the university itself, and most of the other half as an internal university teacher of English—with a year teaching in the States roughly sandwiched between those two large slices. After all this, I went off to Paris in 1970 and there spent five and a quarter years at UNESCO Headquarters, in charge of that enormous and Byzantine organization's work in the arts, humanities, social sciences, philosophy, population studies, racism, "peace," Human Rights and any other unattached, and probably politically hot, subject which the Organization has been told by its governing body to concern itself with. That experience, about which I have written a book,¹ taught me above all how fragile is the hold on Human Rights across most parts of the globe; how much the Organization's founding principles—that truth should be pursued as objectively as possible and then disseminated as freely and as widely as

¹ *An Idea and Its Servants* (New York: Oxford, 1978).

possible—are disregarded; how few nations—even of those which are professedly democratic—exercise many democratic practices, least of all that of free speech; but that in the end how inescapable and demanding is Yeats's assertion that "words alone are certain good," by which I have always taken him to be talking about the struggle with words to say what you want as honestly as you know how, no matter what the cost to your own public comfort or *amour propre*.

So that was one never-to-be-forgotten lesson from Paris. The other was from the peculiarly French experience rather than the international nature of the job. It was the realization that, publicly at least and to some extent privately also, the French still respect the discipline of the mind to a degree which the British would be embarrassed about, are indeed busy not recognizing. I am not saying the French are cleverer than we are. I am not saying that their attitudes are exportable. Attitudes rooted in a particular culture can rarely be uprooted and transplanted. We should be more careful than we are about cross-cultural comparisons such as those often used in England, when it is pointed out, say, that the city of Berlin spends more on its opera or its Philharmonic Orchestra than is spent on opera companies or orchestras in the whole of Great Britain. I am inventing the comparisons, but the general type of the argument is thus. For you have then to point out that such high-bourgeois support comes from a society traditionally hierarchical and proud of its public assertions; that that same pride has led to other less attractive national manifestations, especially in this century; and that it goes along with a neglect of some other, less spectacular but very humane, activities which we *do* fund. Still, to come back to the French. There is still a sense in which, chiefly I suppose because of their high degree of centralization and because of very much else in their history and culture, one is aware of a society which publicly tells itself that it respects the mind in action. *Le Monde* is an impressive example; their television a less impressive because a ponderous one. The contrast with the British public sense of its own hold on intellectual activity could hardly be more striking.

To start at the simplest level—or, more accurately, the most basic. We were the first nation to be able to report through our Registrar General, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that we were for all practical purposes fully literate. I don't say that, in spite of all the money we have spent on full-time compulsory education, we have gone backwards since then. I have not tried to make that direct and difficult quantitative comparison. I recall the proud late-nineteenth-century announcement so that it can provide a backdrop to this late-twentieth-century fact. Only a few years ago we discovered, largely through the persistence of some people

with a missionary spirit, that roughly two million adults in Britain are functionally illiterate. The figure shocked enough people to set in motion a typically British enterprise. An adult literacy scheme was set up, with initial pump-priming from central government, and the usual assumption that the local educational authorities would take over running and paying for the operation after a few years. A great many volunteers were involved. The BBC put much energy and considerable funds into television and other forms of backup. After a few years we seemed to have been useful to perhaps one in eight of those illiterates. It's a slow process and at this rate will take us till roughly the turn of the century to eradicate the problem.

But, as is so often the case, out of that exercise has emerged another and no less difficult problem. To help people merely to be literate is not enough. The condition of illiteracy is like existing in a twilight world. Illiterate people have been cut off from much in the social, political, psychological come-and-go, give-and-take, which literate people find in newspapers and in all sorts of other forms of print; their vocabulary has not stretched and reached out. So what they need, once they are literate, is help in what we are now calling adult basic education, education tailored to their needs in all those skills for basic coping which people such as we so take for granted that we don't even notice our own simple mastery of them; but which, if we didn't have them, would leave us part blind and deaf, and certainly the victims of all the con men of our kinds of society (to put it no higher). And if you add to the newly literate that range of people who, though not technically illiterate, are nevertheless not literate or numerate enough to handle adequately either life outside or much in their private lives, then you reach a total of adults in need of Basic Adult Education, about three million, we reckon. This is about seven or eight per cent of all adults; not a figure to be easy about. We are approaching this problem in our usual way: a little central funding, much missionary effort from some who are especially interested in the matter, a spotty response by local government authorities, lots of help possible from volunteers—in short, far less than is needed but lots of good intentions, and some good actions. At least, though, this government has continued the Adult Literacy unit for at least a few more years, given it a very slightly better budget, and widened its brief by calling it an Adult Basic Skills unit (the introduction of the word "skills" instead of "education" is so as to make the small expenditure more palatable to a government which wants to cut public expenditure greatly, but also wants to do all it can to encourage greater economic efficiency). So there we are; aware of the issue, with a unit still alive and living on slightly increased injections, but still able to do little more than pick and peck at the problems.

That is a particular area. It is time to move to the more general and more difficult plane. A common attitude in British education today is a reluctance to impose intellectual effort, coupled with a mistrust of the more sophisticated forms of verbal expression, written and oral—though not of technical languages, technical jargon, or that kind of circumlocutory speech which appears to put ordinary acts into a self-sustaining and self-justifying technological world.

A typical example of this latter came over on BBC Radio the other day. A man was being asked whether some new electronic gadget was cheap enough to be bought for the home. His reply came out of the linguistic world of complex forward planning. Behind it one could almost hear talk about the “scenario” of “options” for “space probes.” He replied: “It would fit very well into the realm of conceivability for the average person.” You and I could afford it. One also often finds these days a rejection of the past which includes a disinclination to introduce pupils and students to what I shall deliberately call “the literary heritage” and, concomitant with that, a quite widespread and strong rejection of the value of learning any part of that heritage by heart. But that last attitude has a longer history even than the others. Matthew Arnold attacked it in his annual reports as a Chief Inspector of elementary schools over a hundred years ago. But there was a difference. In his day they still believed in “parrot learning,” but they wanted it to be of capes and bays and rivers, heats and solids, the reigns of kings and queens, and all that Gradgrindery; it was the learning of passages from that “useless” form—literature—which they didn’t believe in.

The British have a fine, one-and-a-half-century old tradition of extra-mural education, offered to their surrounding districts by the universities. To their credit, and against all the odds, it was begun by Oxford and Cambridge, spread to London University, and so moved outwards. The crown of that tradition, and the best single offering by the British to the development of adult education worldwide, was the Tutorial Class, which was invented in the early years of this century from the coming together of Albert Mansbridge, the founder of the Workers’ Educational Association, and the great and good social historian R.H. Tawney, who was at the time a young university lecturer. The essence of the case was that even ill-educated workers could, if given good teaching over time, with guided reading and regular written work, become exceptionally well-trained intellectually. So they had to register for three years of study by lecture and discussion, for two hours on one evening of each week over each autumn and winter half-year. The results fully bore out Mansbridge and Tawney’s faith. Those early classes trained many who later become Labor MPs, union leaders, university teachers and even an editor of *The Guardian*. They also did

something uncovenanted: they helped to redefine not only the teaching but the substance of some of the subjects they offered their mature students. The questions “uneducated” adults can ask about politics or economics can have a special edge. I like, incidentally, to think that the process of redefinition continued until at least the ‘forties and ‘fifties, since the subject usually called “contemporary cultural studies” (it is a field rather than a subject), which is now being offered in a number of universities and polytechnics, substantially came out of WEA and Extension Tutorial Classes, many of which had started as “straight” literature classes.

But the chief thing to say about the Tutorial Class now is that its numbers have suffered a catastrophic decline over the past thirty years. Most universities offer hardly any such classes. Only a tiny handful offer a substantial number. Instead, they offer short courses, often with fashionable and ingratiating titles. They claim that life is too fast nowadays for any great number of people to be willing or able to commit themselves so substantially and continuously; or they say that the ill-educated but potentially highly-educable workers who manned the early Tutorial Classes have now, because of the improvements in our mandatory educational provision over the present century, passed through the system into full-time higher education. (This is to see the Tutorial Class only as a remedial and short-term expedient. That is, in my view, wholly to undervalue it and so its continuing relevance). Or those who are happy to see the tutorial class disappear claim that modern technological devices—all the apparatus of “distance learning”—can perform much more quickly and effectively what the laborious, slow, horse-and-buggy Tutorial Class set out to do. I won’t try to answer all these and other justifications for a great loss, since that would become parochial. On the main question—of whether people can still be called to long and sustained study—let me instance only the immense success of our Open University, which has many more applicants for its demanding degree provision than it has the funds to cater for. That too, people said before it started, was based on a “myth”: that people still want and need the disciplines of both group and solitary study of a sustained kind.

If we turn to university studies, in this case in my own “subject,” English literature, we see another related tendency. If, to everybody’s surprise, the universities moved outside their walls in the nineteenth century, they are less and less committed to doing so in this century, even though their representatives tend to make the right public assertions of their commitment to the local as well as to the international scholarly community. Today that tendency to withdraw has a sharper edge, since the universities are increasingly short of money. But there are deeper pressures

at work and two are dominant, one of long standing, the other a product of the twenty years of growth between the 'fifties and 'seventies. Both converge to intensify the hold among most members of university English departments on rigid subject boundaries. English studies in Britain had a hard time at first, being regarded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a soft option. You should discover books for yourself, it was argued, and do not need to be "taught" them. (This is not, after all, a discreditable point of view.) So the history of the development of the subject, especially at Oxford, Cambridge, and London, is marked by the drive to give it academic respectability and rigour. Each place developed its special pattern, the one stressing the essentiality of early language studies, another of the historical approach, the third of severe critical training, and so on. Here was, in short, a strong pressure to carve out and defend against the objectors a strictly definable subject.

The second main element is the increased professionalism of staff and the professional subdividing of the elements of the "subject" which came about as a result of the enormous expansion of the universities from the 'fifties to the standstill of the 'seventies. Departments which just after the war had numbered seven or eight members of staff, each of whom was expected to take tutorials or seminars—if not to give lectures—over a wide range of topics, whatever their own particular research specialisms, had by the late 'sixties often grown to thirty or more members. They were turning out large numbers of graduates who also sought and often got jobs back at the universities. It was inevitable that an intense, specialist professionalism should emerge, that people should more and more see their competence as restricted to one quite small area, and their teaching too. What was insufficiently attended to, even in the opportunities for re-thinking provided by the large expansion and adequate new funds, was an attempt at redefinition of the subject itself. Rather, the finer and finer professional tuning continued. That is why, if I may be allowed to inject a directly personal note, I said, when I was invited to hold a chair at the University of Birmingham, that I would want to have no "normal" graduate students, students, that is, studying the usual "literary" subjects, but would want to set up a postgraduate center which would move out from literature to the study of contemporary socio-cultural matters. I remember indelibly being invited a couple of years later to, of all places, a new university to speak to their English Society, the department's staff and student society, about the new center. At the end the professor in charge said that it was all very interesting but he didn't see how they could introduce such concerns. He needed the full three years of his undergraduates' time to get them grounded in "our subject."

The debate continues, especially at Oxford, where it is now in full spate.

Only a couple of weeks ago *The Times Higher Education Supplement* published some major statements by the main protagonists. They were very good and revealing papers. The spokesman for the existing Oxford degree—a highly subject-defined and framed arrangement—wrote elegantly and persuasively about its undoubted virtues and achievements and also about its capacity to change, not in response to the latest intellectual fashion, but as a result of careful, civilized, continuing thought and discussion. It was a fine paper so long only as you accepted his basic premise: that the subject is “there,” that “it exists,” as a clearly definable body of material stretching over the centuries and marked “English Literature,” that though it is a hospitably-defined body, there are nevertheless books outside it which are not “English Literature” and that those inside the definition can be studied in the first place and overwhelmingly (though not entirely) as examples of “English Literature.”

His opponent was, at least to me, more convincing. He simply did not accept the frame. He argued that “English Literature” is not at all “out there” and objectively to be defined, but is an artificial construct, determined by battles long ago, continuing professional interests, and, above all, a whole range of implicit but nonetheless powerful social and political assumptions. There is, therefore, no strictly definable field to be called “English Literature.” There have been, over the centuries, books of many sorts coming out of a vast range of contexts, artistic, social, psychological and political. The field is hence in one sense quite limitless and undefinable. Yet, yes, it has to be defined. But any definition has to begin by recognizing both the enormous variety of materials which need to be addressed and also the error of approaching them in a relative void, free of the constant attempt, the integral attempt, to come to grips with them as part of a continuous and continuing historical process. In not recognizing this, I think many English departments have failed to meet the main intellectual challenge before them.

Last, in this brief list of attitudes at different levels in British education, something about the schools. I want to isolate one element only, one related, though at a less than obvious level, to the attitudes I have described as present in the “continuing education” of adults and in the universities. The battle about comprehensive education is going on at least as strongly in Britain today as it was twenty years ago. We are not making much progress with it. One aspect, recently put forcibly in a book, shows the hooks on which we hang ourselves. The writer argues that the needs of the great majority of people, those who form the bulk of pupils at any large comprehensive school, are so overriding on democratic and egalitarian grounds that the loss of adequate academic training for the gifted pupils

(often shown by the inadequacy of pre-university teaching at some comprehensives, or more pervasively in the generally anti-intellectual and anti-academic atmosphere of some such schools) is a price we should be willing to pay so that the great bulk of people can be at least reasonably educated. But this is a false antithesis, and at bottom not only profoundly mistaken but also profoundly illiberal, a dead-end rejection of much of the best in the Western tradition.

There is, it hardly needs saying, an elaborated ideology behind that and much similar educational writing today, and its common elements are fairly easily identified. It is usually put forward by people who are themselves quite highly-educated and often from middle-class backgrounds. They are commonly, to use their own language, "anti-bourgeois and the whole bourgeois tradition." They reject what they see as an implicit invitation by the educational system at all levels to, in the French term, "embourgeoisify" pupils and students by introducing them—on the false grounds that these are part of a universal and objective tradition out there—to bourgeois forms of speech and bourgeois literature and history. Some years ago they quoted Bernstein extensively but nowadays gain more support from the work of Labov. Applying Labov to Britain they argue that, for example, working-class urban teenagers do not need to be introduced to the "elaborated codes" necessary for public competence. They argue instead that the common speech of urban teenagers who have left school at the minimum leaving age, sixteen, ungrammatical and limited in vocabulary though it may be, can nevertheless be a sophisticated instrument of communication. (Since I too admire Labov, I understand what they are saying and to a limited extent accept it.) They go on to argue that to offer people entry into the world of more publicly-accessible and acceptable speech is to do them no favor but is rather by stealth to mould them into the values and attitudes which that form of converse carries—into becoming a servicing sub-branch of the ruling bourgeois world.

I think them substantially mistaken. The usual public forms of speech and writing are needed by as many of us as possible so that we shall manage better—socially, personally, politically, at work. At the lowest level, they are needed to help us prevent ourselves from being cheated by the armies of admen and door-to-door salesmen and fast talkers in which our kinds of society abound. Noble savages or wise old shepherds are no longer likely to emerge, least of all from big city society; if they did, they would soon be picked clean. Nor need our attempts to give this kind of command to our students mean that we are also selling them a whole hidden bourgeois ideology (or an ideology of any other kind). That is precisely the chief educational challenge before us. To meet it requires us to get below the

levels of both unexamined socio-cultural assumptions in ourselves and the simpler forms of rejection of those assumptions—which often have the shrill tones of people who have just discovered original sin.

At UNESCO I came across another variation of much the same attitude. Among one part of the Secretariat—the full-time officials—there was a tendency, when they were discussing the needs of the developing world, to reject claims that funds should be spent on developing the materials of a reading culture at all levels in those societies—book-publishing houses, magazines, local newspapers. Instead, they had a vision (often nourished on McLuhan and water) of helping such societies to skip the whole Gutenberg revolution, to go in one step from dispersed and tribal oral cultures to a unified, centralized, national culture, through the medium above all of the transistor radio. Thus in one step they bypassed consideration of the degree to which solitary reading and writing, not just listening in groups, are unique nourishers of the critical human spirit. They also gave what looked like intellectual justification to those leaders of some of the new countries who certainly do not want a range of dispersed critical points of light within the societies they rule and so do greatly like the idea of centralized unitary control over the means of information and education through the modern mass media.

I think, too, of much of the language of the proponents of what are known as “Community Arts” in Great Britain, many of whom receive funds from the Arts Council (as does, it hardly needs saying, the National Theatre and the Royal Opera House). The definition of art has been enormously widened recently, and I do not myself in principle regret that. But thereafter the problems begin. Some of those who work in the Community Arts reject the relevance of *all* the traditional forms of art, since they see them as merely historically-conditioned bourgeois products. They believe the giving of funds to such activities is a late-capitalist device to maintain the forms and powers of this kind of society. They call themselves “Community Artists” and their activities “Community Arts” because they usually work in the more deprived urban areas, and their main effort is to involve the surrounding community as such rather than to find “promising” individuals and educate them out of their communities. I do not doubt the sincerity of their intentions, nor the personal sacrifices they often make; and some of their work is inventive, remedial, imaginative, and sometimes genuinely funny, too.

My worry about it is different. It is that it has appropriated an OK word—“community”—and that its single-minded grip on that word shows its failure to recognize the importance, in lasting intellectual and imaginative literacy, of individual—indeed lonely—effort. Individualism it

is likely to dismiss as a product of the ambitious, self-seeking, bourgeois mentality. It also rejects, again as a bourgeois myth, the idea of different standards of effort, of achievement and, finally, of gifts. I support the Arts Council's giving of funds to these activities—though not beyond measure, in comparison with the funds going to the more traditional arts. I know that, because in their nature these arts are trying to grow in places where the land has not before been tilled, much of what they spend may be wasted. That is the price for helping good work to be done and good things to happen. (I should add that community artists stress the *process* of making art as more important than the end result, than what is made or can be imaginatively exchanged with other individuals; again, that can be a tenable point of view.) I can even envisage that eventually this kind of activity in some of the least-provided areas of Britain may produce new art forms which might never have emerged without all their experiments. But in the end, judgments have to be made, not judgments from a blinkered set of preconceptions about what are acceptable artistic forms and what not, but judgments about honesty before the material and respect for the materials, and about that combination of natural gifts and unremitting efforts which is needed for almost any considerable achievement. I will not, to take an actual case, agree that a short story by a London taxi-driver, encouraged by his local Community Arts organization, is good *simply* because it has come out of a community context and is by a taxi-driver who has before not written a line. I won't call it "remarkable" if I find it self-indulgent, unexamined, and ungifted. That does no justice to him, or to what he might eventually produce, or to the idea of art itself. But I hope, of course, that I could bring to any discussion of his work with him something of the humane clarity and firmness Professor Shaughnessy displayed.

We cannot leave people in corners, having to our own satisfaction redefined those corners as nicer than the outside, more public world. We are talking about something different from training people to acquire bourgeois speech and assumptions. Nor are we asking them to learn to express themselves like advertising executives, PR people, or many union officials. We are talking about having that respect for them which requires us to help them gain greater, more articulate, and more self-conscious access to their own personal and social lives. We are asking for this kind of provision and this kind of effort not just so that people can manage their public situations better—though that is useful, since so many words uttered publicly today are out only to persuade us or make us conform—but so that they can stand up better in all sorts of deeply personal ways. If that sounds as though I think that, say, an acquaintance with the best that has been thought and said *automatically* makes you a better person, I do not. But

that experience can make us *see* better, and so can illuminate our moral choices. The rest, as always, is up to each one of us and our moral wills.

We all need literacy, imaginative and intellectual literacy, because it is an essential part of our movement towards greater critical self-awareness brought to bear on our own lives and on what society offers us as the desirable life. We all need the continued nourishment which can be given by contact with other, finer, minds. "The unexamined life is not worth living." It may be that "all art aspires to the condition of music." It may be that music, the visual arts, dance, all work on our consciousness at levels well below those of literature. But literature is the most open, explicit, self-aware, contentious, muddy, involved of all the arts. It tries actually to *say* things as they are and beyond a shadow of doubt; so it is always laying itself on the line, inviting contradiction. In the process it lays its authors on the line, too, and so is—both in its creating and in the response to what is created—the most exposed and taxing of the arts. It demands a discipline of the mind and heart, and the result is always up to be challenged and often is as shaking to the writer as to the reader, perhaps more shaking. If I may venture one personal example. Writing parts of my book *The Uses Of Literacy*, I found I was holding some of my own more submerged characteristics—which I had not before suspected, and often did not find particularly admirable—to a scrutiny I did not greatly enjoy. That came out of the actual writing of those parts. Some of my very elderly relatives found parts of the book embarrassing, not because they discovered anything particularly shocking in the skeletons revealed in the family cupboard, but because the whole idea of a public self-analysis was alien to them and deeply disturbing. Some things ought not to be thought of, after that fashion. People whose backgrounds have locked them into such a response have been denied one of the more valuable exercises of the human heart and mind.

May I end with one other true and more recent anecdote, though I shall slightly blur the time and place? I want to do so because the lesson it taught me—though Heaven knows that at my age I should not have needed reminding—seems to me like the visual equivalent of what Mina Shaughnessy taught us by her capacity to see beyond the words in her students' papers to what they mean, say and are trying to unlock. I also want to end like this because I may have seemed somewhat severe and, in a limiting sense, "high-brow" or even (save the mark) "elitist" in this paper.

I was, not all that long ago, in a public baths, built circa the turn of the century, lavatorially-tiled, smelling of chlorine, very bleak-looking, very shabby. I had been there often, so was beginning to be known. This particular morning the attendant on duty was a man of, I suppose, just over

twenty. He was far too heavy for the good of his health. He sat in the dreary cabin provided at the side of the pool for the use of the attendants, smoking a good deal, brewing a succession of cups of tea and leafing through the day's issue of one of the popular newspapers. On the face of it he looked typecast as what our right-wing press likes to call a "yobbo" or "layabout" (except that, as compared with an increasing number who leave school at sixteen, as no doubt he did, he does have a job of sorts). That day, as I was getting dressed and we were alone in the place (it was about eight-thirty in the morning), he walked over to me, looked up at the great glass roof held up by its Edwardian wrought ironwork and asked: "Have you ever noticed all that iron stuff? It's pretty, isn't it? The other day I found in a cupboard at the back a lot of them old kind of photos—you know, all browns. But they were real pretty." His vocabulary was massively inadequate to what he was trying to say. His conscious sense of the amazing thing that was happening inside him was almost non-existent, and I guess he may soon pass the point at which he can be moved to utter such obscure intimations to a near-stranger (though perhaps it was easier because I *am* a near-stranger, and because he's guessed that I am connected with an artistic institution—the college up the road).

I end with that true story, finally, because it seems to me to underline once again, as Mina Shaughnessy so well knew, that we must resist the constant pressure to undervalue others, especially those who do not inhabit our own publicly-articulate world; but also because it underlines our duty not to romanticize the situations such people are in, but to help them, whilst not doing wrong to whatever may be good in their present worlds, to help them in the right ways, to—and I choose the verb deliberately—*surmount* that world.