

one—unless “humanism” is re-defined in a Bolshevik sense. The Bolshevik forerunners were radical and, at times, heroic revolutionaries, but they were not humanists. The list of these Bolshevik precursors would include the dictatorial and totalitarian types of revolutionaries—the Pestels, Nechaevs, Tkachevs, to name only a

few. A great many of them perished at the scaffold. Bukharin could have been one of them if he believed that his death might serve “the Cause.” Russian revolutionaries, and especially Bolsheviks, have often been guided by a moral and political code which we must not think is an easy one to decipher.

The Relations of Love

Aimé?

Yes, Aimé still lives.

He's been elected to the Académie.

Still subject to occasional fits of passion

—I heard of some shopgirl only last year—

but more and more inclined to enjoy his friendships,
drinking wine in the cafés.

. . . Agapē is a monk now on Patmos.

Eros runs an illegal abortion clinic

for wealthy foreign girls in London.

Liebe?

We don't speak of him.

He was arrested in Argentina in crossdress.

I don't think the extradition has come through yet.

And Lyubov?

I haven't heard from Lyubov in a long time.

A beautiful, exquisite

girl. Do you recall her in that Chekhov play?

No one could ever cry like her.

It was said she could weep real tears

that blurred a thousand programmes

and in the same instant smile

that the theatre burst open like a frenzied day
in spring when every leaf is in love with the blue vault.

I haven't heard of Lyubov in a long time.

There are rumours. Some actor who vanished

as Mercutio, reappeared as King Lear, said he had seen her
before the war in the Lubyanka

being dragged along a corridor, a mask of death

caked with dried blood,

but who knows what to believe about Russia?

D. M. Thomas

LETTERS

Dr Bettelheim's "New Illiteracy"

BRUNO BETTELHEIM's article *Janet and Mark and the New Illiteracy* (ENCOUNTER, November) raises more questions than it satisfactorily answers or even brings so reasonably under scrutiny.

When Dr Bettelheim cites Polish primers *vis-à-vis* ours, I would ask if he really believes that showing reading and school as attractive, ultimately valuable pursuits will influence a child's approach to either. (Doesn't he himself state that "children hate to be asked whether they see what is in front of their eyes; it implies that they are stupid"? By the same token, constantly being told or shown that something is "good" must arouse anyone's suspicion—and that of children more readily and instinctively than adults.) I would ask, too, how this differs in any way from the ego-appeal he later decries.

When he suggests that it is in order to gain access to a world of "first and last things," or of "magic," exemplified by the Bible, the Talmud, and the 1727 New England Primer, that a child learns to read, I wonder why he neglects to mention another element present in both the Yeshiva and Colonial school-house learning environments—a teacher ready with a ruler, a birch rod, or a hand. In Wilhelmine Frankfurt, my father left his *bar-mitzvah* class—whose star pupil he was—after he was struck across the face for asking "a question a good Jew does not ask." It was his last-but-one time in a synagogue. Whether or not one approves of this sort of authoritarianism (and I do not) doesn't matter here; but the question does direct one's attention to the crucial role of the teacher. A teacher who seems also to be learning, who seems, in simplest terms, interested, is surely a pivotal part of the learning process.

One might concede that learning to read grants a child access to a special world, but that world is far from secret or magical—it is highly concrete and real, and the child lives in it—it is the world of adults. Adults read; other, older children read; thus learning to read must be one of the things you do in order to get older.

Dr Bettelheim has also not recognised what I call negative motivation; and the best example I can give here is from my own experience. I am told that when I entered first grade (in a Manhattan public school) I knew the alphabet and was able to pick out a few three-letter words. I do not remember any part of the classroom process of *learning* to read, I only remember knowing *how* to. I also recall that in a very short time, I had deduced that since I sat in the fourth seat in the second row from the windows, and since there were six seats to a row, if every pupil had to read aloud, I could count ten sentences from the beginning of the page, mark mine, and read on to the end—which I did, over and over again. I did this with each *Dick and Jane* and then with each *Day In*,

Day Out. My little system only failed when one of the nine before me couldn't get through his sentence, throwing out my calculations. The ability to read meant quite simply that I wouldn't have to read *Dick and Jane* while others did. It meant that I no longer had to hear someone say "that's all for tonight" as they closed a book far too soon. It meant that I could do what the grown-ups did. (That it shortly changed—or that my attitude toward it did—from a key, a tool, to a permanent pleasure is immaterial. My principal motivation was strictly rational, purely ego.)

I have three final questions for Dr Bettelheim.

First, in his note on Spot's metamorphosis into Socks, I am hugely puzzled that he found the name "most unlikely . . . for a dog." I once knew a highly literate smooth fox terrier named *Strümpfchen* (he was white with four black feet), whose owners had had ample demonstrations of his preference for the *New York Times* over the *Daily News*. Second, try as I might, I could not find a reason for calling this condition "the new illiteracy"—for nothing about it is remotely new. And last, because—like children—we hate to be asked whether we see what is so obviously in front of our eyes and so tragically in our schools, how does Dr Bettelheim propose that we go about changing it?

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1. When I say that children hate to be asked to see what is in front of their eyes, this does not contradict that what they see makes an impression on them (if it is not rubbed in). Nor does any attractive picture only make an ego-appeal. If so, we would have to forget all that we learned about a picture's appeal to the unconscious. My point was that, for example, the Polish readers with their pictures without words create an atmosphere which makes reading seem most appealing. Such an atmosphere, when responded to, is conducive to thinking reading most worth while. Mrs Llewellyn suggests that constantly being told something arouses suspicion. How very true. Only I never said that these readers constantly tell something. On the contrary, they create an atmosphere and then leave it at that which is good enough.

2. I agree that the teacher is the most important, or at least a very important, ingredient in learning. But I am also reminded of two Hungarian Nobel-Prize winners who had attended the same school in Budapest and who told me that their teachers were so bad that they had to learn on their own, and that was why they had such academic success. Which just goes to show that the impact of a teacher is difficult to predict. But it also shows that if the books are good and attractive, even a very bad teacher does comparatively little harm. And this was my point. That there are good and very bad teachers in every country, and even in the Yeshiva, should be common knowledge. But I did not say a word about teachers, good, bad, or middling, simply because one cannot generalise about them. Nor do I see why Mrs Llewellyn's father's experience proves more than that even in the Yeshiva there are bad teachers. Did I claim there