

# Saturday Review

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## Writing and Thinking—Part 2

WE CAN'T recall having anyone disagree with us more agreeably than have English teachers and officials of the College Entrance Examination Board. Several weeks ago in this space we criticized CEEB for asking high school students to write an examination essay in twenty minutes, using as their theme a Shavian epigram on non-conformism. Our minor point was that a good epigram or aphorism, like a pithy anecdote, is a poor subject for explanation or elaboration. Our major point was that hasty thinking is the enemy of good writing and education in general. We thought that English teachers should be the last people in the world to put a premium on glibness or superficiality.

The response has been constructive and instructive. The gist of the rebuttal to our minor point was that an epigram or aphorism, whether by G.B.S. or anyone else, is not sacrosanct. Our critics held that the particular quotation used in the examination was a legitimate stimulator for comment. Their reasoning was persuasive, and we are inclined to believe we made too much of that particular point. Score one for the teachers.

As for our major point, CEEB said its job was to find some way of evaluating the student's ability to use the English language properly. They made a distinction between an exercise in creative writing and an exercise in basic expression. They were interested in the latter. They recognized the hazards of writing against the clock. They had considered a more generous allocation of both time and space but found this to be

impracticable. They couldn't recruit enough teachers to grade the papers. Even without respect to college entrance examinations, open-end writing assignments, the teachers felt, put more of a burden on them than it is reasonable to expect them to sustain. Have a heart, they asked us in effect; it is difficult enough to cope with oversized classes without also having to get through a mound of interminable essays.

HERE we are sympathetic but hold our ground. We can't see sharp distinctions between creative writing and basic expression. Straightforward, clear writing is a highly creative exercise. It calls for the sequential organization of thought. It calls for proper words in proper places, and for the elimination of the extraneous. We persist in the view that there ought to be just as much respect for the requirements of time and thought in assessing short, straightforward exposition as in literary expression. In fact, the notion that the one is less demanding or artistic than the other is itself somewhat troubling.

As for the argument that it is unworkable in the first place and unfair in the second place to unload lengthy essays on already overburdened teachers, whether in the ordinary course of classroom work or in CEEB examinations, we fear our basic position was not clearly made. We were not arguing for long papers necessarily. Our main point—and we deserve a low grade for making it poorly—is that even a single paragraph should not be written (or judged) in a pressure cooker.

Twenty minutes is not enough time for a thoughtful, clear response—whether in 500 words or 100 words—to a question testing ability to handle the English language on a “creative” or functional level. Is it impertinent to ask whether the tendency to associate short papers with short time limits may not itself be part of the problem?

We can see a number of advantages, to be sure, in the extended essay. It provides an opportunity to develop a basic idea and to demonstrate one's mastery of the highly essential art of qualifying a statement. And we can see how such essays would tax the facilities of CEEB. We wonder, however, whether it might not be possible for CEEB to recruit judging personnel outside the teaching profession. Competence for such an assignment exists in many areas. We wonder, too, whether essay responses have to be judged in one place. We can see how, in cases where accuracy is ascertainable, as in mathematics or science, the removal of papers from a central judging station could be hazardous. But the evaluation of writing ability calls for judgment rather than the application of precise criteria. Is it altogether impractical to send out papers for grading? In any case, we do not see that difficulties in grading justify shotgun time requirements for examinations in writing.

Of all the letters we received on the subject, none seemed to us more compelling than one from a high school student who intends to major in English. She said she had been at the head of her high school English class. When she came to the twenty-minute question, she found it difficult to put aside all the habits of thinking and writing she had been taught to develop over the years by her English teachers, all of whom had stressed careful, sustained thought and the rigorous organization of ideas for any essay, short or long. She became somewhat panicky when almost ten minutes had passed without anything having been committed to paper. She decided finally that she would try to bluff her way through which she did. Her paper received a high grade. We suppose that this experience may be cited to justify the present examination system, since it did not penalize a talented student and produced a specimen of writing adequate for testing purposes. But it did something else. It ran counter to, and was possibly destructive of, the requirements of good writing and thinking.

We are grateful to CEEB and our critics among the English teachers (most of the English teachers agreed with us, we were pleased to see) for their gracious and constructive comments. We have accepted an invitation to meet with CEEB officials to discuss examinations in general. We expect to report further in this space as matters develop. —N.C.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## How Flexible Should We Be?

AS A LIBRARIAN, I see a great deal of print. Most of it I skip over. But occasionally I see an article that is clear, concise, thought-provoking, and has implications far outside a certain field or country.

"The Uses of Flexibility," by J. William Fulbright [SR, May 8], was such an article. Thank God a man like him can be a Senator in our government and can stay a Senator. And thank you for providing a forum for men like him.

ROBERT G. CHESHIER,  
Librarian,  
Chicago Medical School.

Chicago, Ill.

SENATOR FULBRIGHT appears to be either wilfully blind or incredibly naïve about the facts of life when he appeals for "benign humanism" in dealing with those who gleefully contemplate the eventual demise of our country.

As for tolerance, moderation, and accommodation, doesn't he know we're noted for them? We accommodate the trampling of our flag in the dust and the bombing of our embassies, libraries, people, and property in foreign countries. At home we accommodate the Mafia, the Communist Party, the KKK, the Nazi Party, student rioters, freedom riders, marchers, sit-inners and lie-inners, the purveyors of filth in literature, movies, and television, and the downgrading of the Puritan ethic.

In fact, about the only thing we don't accommodate any more is the Puritan ethic, or at least that part of it which is characterized by moral cleanliness and trustworthy character, and which expects people and nations to tell the truth, pay their just debts, respect law, order, and other people's property and persons, and earn an honest living.

IRENE PRATER DELL.

Carl Junction, Mo.

A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, devoted to helping individuals and small groups to pursue their best interests in reasonable fashion and to find themselves through experiencing human relationships, is confronted by many frustrations. Among these is the recognition that the clients' self-defeating stances are nearly universal and are expressed in, and derived from, the societal level—which is virtually immune to the impact of the individual practitioner.

Senator Fulbright provides me with hope. His recommendations relative to the destructiveness of ideology at the international level are a perfect parallel to what I and others have seen as the crucial problem in human growth: the "overcivilization" of the individual.

It has long been evident that attitudes and ideologies are built in psychologically very early in life, that they are reinforced by unreasonable guilt, and that they are enormously restrictive of the use of human abilities. Most of us are forced or persuaded in some degree to believe that we must be blindly virtuous, adhere to some

dogma or ideology, renounce selfish motives, subdue our biological nature, and follow sets of precepts in thinking, feeling, and relating to others. The breadth and intensity of this adherence to rules are highly causative of self-alienation and obliviousness to interpersonal nuances and to the possibilities of enrichment by others; they are also an important determinant of reactive rage and destructiveness. It is no fluke that virtue engenders destruction. One can be ideologically virtuous only at the cost of disfranchising one's basic nature and, with or without awareness, resenting it. Civilizing, when it demands ideological conformity, causes rather than controls violence—even though such violence at times is labeled virtue. It is not at all surprising that "good" boys and girls sometimes erupt with antisocial acts that are so "unlike" them.

Bravos to Senator Fulbright for recognizing so eloquently the importance of the freedom to observe, to think, and to change one's mind.

BERTRAM R. FORER,  
Clinical Psychologist.

Los Angeles, Calif.

SENATOR FULBRIGHT believes that we have become so preoccupied with ideology that we fail to realize that other considerations may be of more importance in shaping policy in Communist countries. I agree that other than ideological motives may shape national goals. But with the Communists, Marxist-Leninist principles seem to be the foundation for much of their action, both in domestic affairs and in international re-

lations. Their behavior in both areas may seem to deviate from basic principles at times, but when it does this is only a variation on a basic theme and not a change in the theme itself.

For instance, it has always been an essential part of Russian policy to establish control, or at least some form of paternalistic protection, over adjacent countries in order to ensure the security of Russia's own borders. This is Russian nationalism at work. The Soviet Union, however, has the additional objective of spreading Communism throughout the world by political subversion, military threats, and support of wars of "national liberation."

Possibly the United States is too preoccupied by ideology in its dealings with Russia, but we cannot forget that the leaders of China and the Soviet Union are Communists, and no matter what national historical considerations are brought into play, this ideological force sways, guides, and deeply influences any decisions they make. This is why ideology cannot be dismissed as readily as Senator Fulbright wishes it would be.

DONALD H. OWEN.

Spokane, Wash.

## Art Explosion

BRAVO TO Katharine Kuh for a) her article on our new Los Angeles County Art Museum [SR, Apr. 3] and b) her tender tact. I am glad that for Miss Kuh, as for me, the great thing is the existence of the museum,

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