

**On Literacy.** Robert Pattison. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 246 pages, \$17.95.

*Reviewed by William J. Hampton, Tempo Advertising and Public Relations*

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It is the notion of Robert Pattison, a teacher of humanities at Southampton College, that people generally do not have a very clear idea of what "literacy" means, or ought to mean, and that the word therefore needs more precise defining than it has thus far gotten. This has caused him to produce *On Literacy*, subtitled *The Politics of the Word From Homer to the Age of Rock*, a work which turns out to be a curious amalgam of shrewd observation about what language has meant to its users over the centuries and solemn, stuffed-owl nonsense.

"Literacy," says Pattison, "is mechanical ability with the technologies of language coupled with consciousness of language as a force in human affairs," and he identifies two senses usually qualified by the word "functional," and meaning the ability to read and write well enough to survive. The other sense in which Pattison finds we use the word is a much broader one, and it means something like a kind of linguistic self-consciousness; an awareness of ourselves as users of language and as manipulators of words to communicate ideas and information.

It will immediately occur to readers of Pattison's book that there is a third very common and very important sense in which we use the word "literacy." It is, indeed, the dictionary definition: "showing extensive knowledge, learning or culture." But this meaning of the word gets short shrift from Pattison, who has other fish to fry. His book is not about being well or broadly read. It is about how we can learn to live with what is usually described as sub-standard English by altering our ideas about what "literacy" means.

Pattison is most useful to his readers in his early chapters when he speculates about what he calls the "attitudes toward language" of earlier centuries. By "attitudes toward language" he does not mean the technical understanding of how language works, but of the uses to which it can be put, and putting it to use is what he sometimes but not always means when he says "politics." His reader learns that Pattison is in this respect often like Humpty Dumpty in *Alice*: "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

Pattison is interested in the role played by reading, writing, speech, and the consciousness of language in the development of civilizations. He finds that the Homeric hero used speech for political ends; the Puritans saw it as access to God's divine plan, wherein the will of Providence is seen; and nineteenth century Americans used it as a tool for gaining "the earthly promise," by which is meant material and political ends.

All of which is, of course, derived from the evidence left us by the articulate and the lettered. No one really knows what, if any, attitudes toward language the mute and

unrecorded mass may have had.

Mr. Pattison's most productive chapter is his second, in which he goes after the question of which elements in writing and reading remain absolutely unchanged from one culture to another, and which are subject to conditioning by social factors. One of the unchanging elements, he reminds us, is the effect that writing has on the writer. It "lends dignity to the expression of speech but in the process becomes vain and intolerant."

"When words materialize in writing, they acquire an added presence that often makes criticism more, not less, difficult," says Pattison, and he goes on to trace the instinctive resistance to this hardening force which has been expressed over the centuries, in one way or another, by such diverse practitioners as Plato, Chief Cobb of the Choctaw tribe, and the modern university freshman. It is a bright, insightful chapter, and it ought to be required reading for all prospective teachers of Bonehead English.

It is when Pattison attempts to extend some of his speculations about literacy's past into the present that he gets into trouble. We are, he thinks, too rigid about the rules, and he spends an inordinate amount of time flailing away against real and imaginary purists who, he suspects, are up to something dark and sinister in their advocacy of a standard English. Two of his favorite targets are John Simon and Edwin Newman. He ranks them at the top of his list of "sanctimonious . . . correctness junkies," and he carries on as though these two are the sworn enemies of the unlettered.

Which, of course, they are not. If Simon and Newman are picking on anyone, it's the people who deserve it, the journalists, politicians, educators and other professional "communicators" who ought to be able to express themselves with a little grace and precision, but who do not.

The modern American, concludes Pattison, uses language for the cataloging of facts—for the mere transmission of data. He thinks we have lost the "sublime sense of language" that other generations are supposed to have had and that, while it is of practical advantage for us to learn "correct" English because it will get us accepted by the Right People, we are turning into a society in which "inability to communicate in the linguistic style approved by the leadership of government, industry and the professions increases the difficulty of joining these ranks or even attacking them in any effective way." Pattison, it appears, can understand the favor conferred upon Liza by Professor Higgins when he taught her to talk like a duchess, but he really wishes Higgins had not.

And now we see what Pattison is really on about, and it turns out to be that trendy, sentimental *egalitarianism* about language that used to be so popular in college English departments in the Sixties, and which evidently has not entirely disappeared. It is the notion that language ought somehow to be democratic, like governments, and that when Liza took to talking elegantly something warm and wonderfully expressive was lost.

Which is nonsense. No reasonably bright teacher of English ever insists that his students must lose the tongue they began with, but only that if they hope to be understood everywhere, geographically and socially, they must learn the new one called standard English. Most of us are in this sense bi-lingual and, while we may learn "correct" English, and use it when we want to, we can still employ the language of our origins when it serves. Martin Luther King, who was perfectly capable of the kind of rhetoric Mr. Pattison thinks we have lost, was still able to speak Street Black when he wanted to.

It is Pattison's dubious and overdrawn perception of the contemporary world that is skewed in the latter part of *On Literacy*, and there is so much of it that his reader grows increasingly unwilling to accept what he says. Few readers will buy his

description of poor old Simon and Newman as "social critics peddling a distinct though unarticulated political ideology under the guise of popular linguistic commentary." They will wonder how, if it is unarticulated, it can be distinct; they will wonder what the writer means by "political" this time; and they will ask themselves if Pattison is not pursuing windmills.

They are not likely to accept his assertion that "electronic media are a powerful stimulant to the development of a literacy centered on the spoken word" because they will have watched the effect of the electronic media on the spoken word for themselves, and their findings will not agree with this.

Pattison is earnestly hip: "Rock demands respect as the first art form of the new literacy. Its lyricism is full of vigor and wit." He is portentous: "The highest rates of alcoholism and suicide are to be found not in the developing nations but in the developed economies where reading and writing skills are nearly universal." And he is often wildly inaccurate: "advertising . . . generates a truly lively and exciting rhetoric because it is motivated by the living principle of greed and remains in touch with the spoken vitality of the popular language."

In the end, *On Literacy* becomes merely so much counter-culture faddism tarted up with appeals to the classical past and the electronic present to give it heft. It is a great pity, because much of the book, particularly those sections dealing with the role language has played in earlier civilizations, is filled with acute observation and solid common sense. Much of what Mr. Pattison wants us to see about the uses of language is sound. He wants us not to feel self-conscious about "sub-standard English." He wants us to avoid becoming bogged down in too much attention to the "rules." He wants standard English taught as a practical tool, not as some kind of "moral or aesthetic norm," and he wants us to remain open to anything new that may add color and vitality to the language. And who would argue with that?

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