

“NOTHING IS AS SIMPLE AS ABC”

MARY JANE SCHENCK

Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders. *A B C: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988.

As teachers of reading and writing from K-16, we often find ourselves defending our chosen professional work as crucial not only to our students' lives but also to the health of the nation. Promoting literacy is noble, and it relieves some of our frustrations over pay scales and school politics to see ourselves as champions of a good cause. Thus we have taken our part in shaping the official wisdom that if our students would read, if they could think critically and write well, they would grow up to hold better jobs and contribute significantly to reducing the social problems that embarrass us as a nation. It is also in our professional interest to promote the social advantages of school-based literacy even though we know we aren't responsible for America losing its competitive edge or failing to provide a democracy of opportunity for all.

The contradiction in our position is not a simple matter of being happy to take the credit while being reluctant to take the blame. The contradiction lies in the nature of literacy itself which, among other things, functions as both a liberator of the individual and as a social barrier. Thanks to the growing field of literacy studies, we are increasingly aware of the various types of literacy in our society and the very complex relationship they have to social consequences. By broadening the definition of literacy and revising assessments of its cognitive and social effects, research on literacy is important to classroom teachers because it helps us answer those who make school reform or social progress sound as easy as ABC.

One strand of research in the expanding field of literacy studies began in the fertile crossing of anthropology, linguistics, and literary criticism by Ian Watt, Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Eric Havelock. Their pioneering work comparing the transmission of knowledge in pre-literate societies to the literacy introduced by the Greek

alphabet elaborated on a dichotomy between oral and literate, pre-scientific and scientific cultures discussed by Claude Levi-Strauss and other anthropologists. In assessing the phenomenon of Greek literacy, they made claims about the superiority of the alphabet and the sophistication of thought that derived from the new method of recording language. In a 1968 article, "The Consequences of Literacy," for instance, Goody and Watt write, "phonetic writing, by imitating human discourse, is, in fact, symbolizing, not the objects of the social and natural order, but the very process of human interaction in speech . . . Phonetic systems are therefore adapted to expressing every nuance of individual thought" (38).

Alphabetic writing by virtue of its capacity to capture speech is assumed to be the key element in the development of new cognitive processes that generated the Western notion of history and philosophy, or objective discourse. By freezing speech, writing allowed early thinkers to amass and categorize information in new ways and acquire distance from sensory phenomena in order to analyze them. Written language, as opposed to oral language, could be context-free and make its arguments not on an appeal to tradition or authority but logic (Olson). The impact of this line of thinking was to make logical discourse, and one of its offspring, the school-taught essay, into a synonym for literacy itself. The ability to read and to write the sort of texts we find in schools was thus assumed to be the key to personal success as well as the goal of national literacy campaigns.

The essay equation of alphabetic writing-logical discourse-literacy has been challenged, however. The "myth of literacy," as Harvey Graff calls it, is that literacy leads to higher order reasoning and fosters urbanization, modern governments, individual freedom, social equality, political stability, and a citizenry respectful of education and civic responsibility. Graff demonstrates the lack of historical evidence for the literacy myth by looking at other cultures where universal literacy meant, for example, the ability to read the Bible but did not translate into political equality and/or prosperity.

Research on the complex types of non-schooled literacy in cultures around the world as well as in non-mainstream cultures in the U.S. (Shirley Brice Heath, Sylvia Scribner, Michael Coles, and Deborah Tannen) has helped to destroy the literacy myth. Part of these scholars' contribution has been to call into question the polarities which were fundamental to many of the earlier claims

about the cognitive consequences of literacy. These polarities (oral/literate, speech/writing) generated others (utterance/text, elaborated/restricted, contextual/autonomous) which have been overused to describe cultural situations as well as language. The lines are now blurred and the dichotomies are better seen as a continuum. Other lines have also been blurred as literacy studies come together with cultural studies. Theory is meeting practice at conferences, such as those sponsored by MLA which brought together academics and advocates for work-place and home-based literacy programs. The pace of conferences and special publications (MLA's *The Right to Literacy*) has quickened and research questions have become ever more complex.

Despite this complexity (or perhaps because of it), books of synthesis that trace the history of literacy in broad brush strokes have an understandable, but perhaps dangerous appeal. They are especially attractive when they celebrate deeply held values, build on the comfortable, old assumptions about a split between the oral and the literate, and predictably bash computers. The subject of the following review is one such book.

* * *

A B C: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind, by Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders (San Francisco, North Point Press, 1988), is a reflective essay on the impact of the alphabet on thought, individuals, and the relationship between individuals. According to the preface, the book resulted from conversations between the authors on the impact of literacy campaigns on the unlettered and the impact of communication theories on their colleagues (semiotic critics, no doubt). Of literacy campaigns *per se* nothing is said, but throughout the book literacy is presented as a potential trap, an alienation from truth and other people. By implication, then, literacy programs threaten the illiterate with a lose of community. In between the preface and a useful annotated bibliography are separate chapters on the post-alphabetic concept of the word, memory, text, self, narration, and the decline of "mother tongue" into Newspeak and Uniquack.

Illich and Sanders begin by stating that the Greek alphabet creates "the word" by freezing speech. Oral language is ephemeral; memory non-existent as we know it. Using the work of Lord and Parry on the oral epic, they show that in prehistory, memory is not a storehouse as we would describe it. The oral poet, driven

by the rhythms of preceding sounds, improvises his poem drawing on short formulas that are chosen for their rhythmic qualities as much as their meaning. The aesthetic of Homer, then, is “fluent improvisation within strictly limited means” whereas the art of post-literate classicism “gives poetic originality free rein.” (19)

The alphabet introduces the possibility of a fixed, i.e. written text, an original, and also of memorization. Until there is a written text, there cannot be the modern sense of memory, which is different from “recollecting” or “meditating.” It is clear that Illich and Sanders use the latter terms for memories/intimations of immortality when they present Plato as the first man of letters who worried about the influence of silent, passive texts on his pupils. The connection between thought, memory, meditation, and love is expressed in the “Symposium” when Diotema says, “Eros longs for what is permanent, and it takes shape when we meditate on the immortal truth, on *eidos*. Only this kind of loving meditation can lead to wisdom. Plato sees this search for the springs of truth as being threatened by a polymathy based on writing.” (25) For Illich and Sanders, “Plato’s intellectual path, his access to truth and ideas, is an epic one.” (24) Here we are close to a central issue for Illich and Sanders. They identify orality with the immortal truth, love, and community which, they imply, is inevitably altered by the arrival of the alphabet.

ABC argues that as a consequence of literacy, classical rhetoric elaborates a new version of memory, not the natural one described by Plato as a journey to find driftwood along a river but an artificial one, a trip “to a storage room, as Aristotle says, ‘to recover knowledge through previous sensations held in one’s memory’ ” (26). So the metaphors go—storage bins, attics, rooms with furniture, “architectonic images . . . suited to the shift from the aural to the visual emphasis that a script culture . . . demands” (27).

As Illich and Sanders point out, Greek literacy was extremely limited in social impact, but during the Middle Ages writing effectuates significant social change. Oath taking, formerly an oral performance used to establish truth, becomes incorporated into writing by swearing on the Gospels. Property is described and ownership legitimated by descriptions in writing; documents begin to acquire a legitimacy of their own and no longer serve as mere records of oral events; words are removed from the oral flow of speech and separated graphically on the page; the scriptorium becomes a place where an author composes in writing rather than

dictating—all of which signify widespread cultural change from oral culture to an acceptance of the belief that truth resides in texts.

When truth becomes increasingly connected to a written text, the power of writing to control follows. The ideas of translation and separate languages, as we know them, are products of writing. Illich and Sanders maintain that in oral cultures, people in polyglot environments want to “understand” each other; they want an interpreter, not a translator, for translation is a concept derived from the fixed written text. The borders between languages remain fluid in the oral context, and understanding is communally created. But writing introduces the idea of separation of languages and coincidentally a desire to standardize them. There were attempts to standardize the pronunciation of Latin and to find “originals” of non-existent texts. Therefore, writing drives the development of a new concept, official control of language. An important example is the first grammar of a vernacular language written by the Spaniard Nebrija in 1492. “He wanted to replace the people’s vernacular with the grammarian’s language. The humanist proposes the standardization of colloquial language to remove the new technology of printing from the vernacular domain—to prevent people from printing and reading in the various languages that, up to that time, they had only spoken” (67-68). Thus, for Illich and Sanders, the counterpart to the freedom offered by literacy is the attempt by others to control and co-opt language that used to belong to the living, oral culture.

They believe that the alphabet also introduces us to the self which is fabricated through texts. “Where there is no alphabet, there can neither be a memory conceived as storehouse nor the ‘I’ as its appointed watchman The self is a cloth we have been weaving over centuries in confessions, journals, diaries, memories, and in its most literate incarnation, the autobiography” (72-73). The self is a function of written texts, and so is the lie and the age of fiction. The ultimate trick of the written word is to make us believe in its truthfulness. Chaucer represents the move from storytelling to writing fiction because he begins his narrative by telling us that he is recounting what he remembers hearing, yet he uses syntactic structures influenced by written language that practically assure forgetting when heard orally. Also, “By assigning to himself the capacity to remember every scrap and nuance, every blink and titter of all thirty-three pilgrims, [he] sets himself up as a liar. Only by placing himself in this category can he become

a mundane author. In any other category of literary creation, Chaucer would be usurping divine authorship” (91).

The strategies used in fiction to present written texts as the truth only call attention to their fictional status. The dis-ease of the written text's claim to truth is evident in the development of the novel. Defoe in the *Journals of the Plague Year* makes up “news” about the plague and uses a literary form, the journal, to write history. Illich and Sanders use Chaucer, Defoe, and Twain to illustrate the problematic nature of literacy. Chaucer in an age of limited literacy confronts what it means to be an author; Defoe in an age of middle class literacy asks what it may mean to be part of the illiterate poor who can leave no record of themselves; and Twain in mid-nineteenth century America couches the question as a clash between two classes—the lettered vs. Huck and Jim. Huck's lighting out for the territory is a pursuit of the diminishing realm of orality and a freedom from “the trap of literacy” (105). For, although there is a world closed to the unlettered who cannot read *Huckleberry Finn*, there is also a rich world of orality which cannot be known by the literate. Illiah and Sanders maintain that no one would have imagined at the end of the nineteenth century that we would still be worrying about literacy (so inevitable did the “civilizing” of all the territory seem), nor did anyone other than Twain perhaps notice the trap, the demise of oral culture.

With a passing allusion to the naivety of promoting computer “literacy,” Illiah and Sanders present the most dangerous part of the trap for modern times, the worship of machines and machine language. Although they evoke H. G. Wells and George Orwell, they insist that “It is not our intention to oppose a paranoiac vision of today's communications to the romantic utopia of a virgin vernacular that mirrors a factual truth” (108). They borrow Uniquack from James Reston and use it for “a jelly formed of amoeba-words” (107)—the best definition in the book. Uniquack and Newspeak are what we have left to use if we think of language as “a code.” For them, Orwell rejects Basic English (which he had once promoted) in coining the term Newspeak for empty, not just negative communication. In 1984, when Winston betrays his last love by telling O'Brien to torture Julia, Winston destroys himself and becomes a “self-less” person integrated into meaningless communication. What Orwell prophesized is not so much the dangers of political totalitarianism as the degeneration of language into meaningless/contentless codes and human expression into “waste

products from technical word-factories” (117). For them, substituting “communication” for human language is synonymous with substituting hate for love.

The postscript of *ABC* is a meditation on the alphabetization of silence, the impact of literacy on silent, meditative truth. As opposed to the silence that Genesis speaks of, which is the firmament separating the voices of Heaven from the Abyss below, modern silence developed from writing—the pause between words, the silence of reading. Biblical silence “has vanished from the burnt-out world of Orwell’s cipher. The ‘zero’ that separates beeps has replaced it. And this one-zero-one, not silence, is the stuff from which the interface between Winston and Julia is made. After the self-betrayal of Room 101, these two post-humans are not only beyond words, they are also beyond ‘silence,’ and equally beyond the ability to refer to their co-presence with the personal pronoun ‘we.’ They have turned into an interactive assembly of two. The new Adam and Eve are the critters of a computer” (120).

If literacy has created the self, it has also led to the loneliness of the “I” and the semantic poverty of the “we” which in most Western languages tells us nothing about the relationship between the I and the other. Although Illich and Sanders insist that the end of their book is not a proposal “to return to ethnic silence, the silent co-presence before words, language and text came into being” (127), and although they admit to being children of the book, nevertheless they wistfully “long for the one silent space that remains open in our examined lives, and that is the silence of friendship” (127).

* * *

Throughout the book, literacy is treated reverentially as a powerful achievement, but even more importantly as a potential loss. First, writing slices into the wholeness of speech to isolate words, next a facile polyglot orality is transformed into grammar and bound between hard covers, then literacy raises the lie to an art form in fiction, and ultimately communication theory and computers infect our ability to perceive our connections to others.

Illich and Sanders may not want to be taken for contemporary luddites who worry about machines taking over and thought police stalking every corner, but at each turn, they emphasize the potential for writing to alienate, to be used as a means of control, and to disrupt our access to the spirit and enduring truth. Their reading

of Plato and the Bible, like their preference for Henry Adams' spiritual biography over Benjamin Franklin's materialism, shows their alignment with a traditional equation of truth/love/friendship that is ideal and spiritual. Literacy is seen as the material technology which is a bogus creator; one of the first of its creations is the self which is alienated by the same stroke from its origins in "mother tongue." Post-lapsarian man is re-cast in their schema as post-alphabetic man, which accounts, of course, for the yearning for the ideal and the implication that oral cultures are not alienated and have a greater sense of community. Illiah and Sander's longing for wholeness and presence is palpable in the leit-motif of silence, an understanding without words, which runs throughout the book. Theirs is beautiful vision but they needed a serpent to explain the darker side of the real world. In their case, it is the alphabet which they have mythologized along with oral culture, just as snakes were mythologized before them.

Their claims about the alphabet and the word illustrate my reservations about their basic assumptions. They not only mistake alphabetic writing for the whole history of writing (Cf Gaur, Gelb, Schmandt-Besserat), but they also write of oral cultures in a completely romantic fashion. For them, oral cultures know only the ephemeral sound of the moment. Even pauses in the continuous stream of language are just syllables, phrases and strophes, not words. They do give a nod in the direction of mnemonic devices used in oral culture to freeze speech in time, but they basically see a "great divide" (Goody) between oral and literate cultures. "In the oral beyond, there is no 'content' distinct from the winged word that always rushes by before it has been fully grasped, no 'subject matter' that can be conceived of, entrusted to teachers, and acquired by pupils (hence no 'education,' 'learning,' and 'school')" (7). I can imagine the surprise of elders and priests in living oral cultures who spend months and years training initiates in the rituals and secrets of their religious or social organizations upon learning that they have no words and no education to offer their young people. Oral schooling alienates just as ours does in separating the gifted from the rest of the society. There are other references to oral cultures that reflect at best a generalist's command of the issues.

What is more critical to Illiah and Sander's argument is their use of Plato to bolster the romantic notion that orality brings us closer to the truth. When they state, "Plato's intellectual path, his

access to truth and ideas, is an epic one" (24), they mean that the oral epics in content and method of production are closer to the truth than what is found in writing. But have they forgotten that Plato banished the poets from the Republic? To me, they are confusing two very different things—meditation and orally created epics. Plato may have distrusted writing, but as Havelock explains, Plato was establishing new ways to pursue the truth through rigorous dialectical thought. The new truths required a new way of teaching. Until Plato's time, the epics were the primary vehicle of education, and what Plato had to argue against was not so much the myths (as we know he used them himself), but their method. The oral epic required on the part of the teller and audience an emotional involvement that Plato rejected absolutely as a method for arriving at truth. Driven by rhythm, engaged in gestures, the oral poet becomes the characters and creates for the audience a total identification with the events. "This kind of drama, this way of reliving experience in memory instead of analyzing and understanding it, is for [Plato] 'the enemy' " (Havelock 45). In short, Plato must banish the poets because their methods impede the development of new ways of thinking that are intimately tied to the availability of writing, not orality.

I believe that Illich and Sanders selectively use Plato and focus on controlling aspects of written language because they want to locate truth and freedom in an oral realm. If they want merely to recognize and to preserve the value in oral cultures (Huck and Jim's tales and superstitions), or to suggest that literacy and computers are a mixed blessing, the points are well taken. But the implication that literacy corrupts and literacy campaigns will destroy community ("ethic silence") among humans is posited on a dichotomy between orality and literacy that simply cannot explain the complex phenomenon of literacy in any culture that has any graphic form of recording information, least of all modern ones. It is dangerously romantic to suggest that orality is purer or closer to truth and love than literacy, just as it is naive to suggest that if children would read more great books we would have fewer teenage pregnancies. The fact that computers use codes to process information or that some of our colleagues like semiotic approaches to texts has not much to do with the quality of anyone's personal commitments to others. Likewise, the easy orality of the streetcorner encounters between modern day Hucks and Jims does

little to assure the quality of their community. Neither their orality nor my literacy is so simple.

The greatest irony of *ABC* is the final sentence of the book celebrating the silence of friendship, i.e., that which goes without words. At the end of this sentence, an asterisk refers the reader back to an epigraph—a lengthy quotation in Latin from a letter expounding on St. Paul's views of Christian *caritas* in Corinthians 1:13—to learn more about friendship. Unfortunately, for those of us whose high school Latin has retreated into pre-history, the epigraph is read with difficulty, if at all. Instead of openness or understanding, the reader is shut out by the elitist maneuver of quoting from a dead language. The literacy trap has sprung again.

Mary Jane Schenck is a Professor of English at the University of Tampa where she directed freshman composition and chaired the division of humanities. She is a former member of the Executive Council of CCCC and is on the board of consultant evaluators for WPA. She is the author of *The Fabliaux: Tale of Wit and Deception*, a composition text *Read, Write, Revise*, and articles on composition and literature in *Fabula*, *Comparative Literature*, and *Training the New Teacher of College Composition*.

WORKS CITED

- Diringer, David. *Writing*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1962.
- Gelb, I.J. *A Study of Writing*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963.
- Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- ____ and Ian Watt. "The Consequences of Literacy." In *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968.
- Havelock, Eric A. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge: Belnap Press of Harvard P, 1963.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. "The Functions and Uses of Literacy." *Journal of Communication* 29.2 (1980): 123-33.
- ____. *Ways With Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960.
- Lunsford, Andrea A., Helene Moglen, and James Slevin, eds. *The Right to Literacy*. NY: MLA, 1990.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 1962.
- Mumford, Lewis. *Art and Technics*. New York: Columbia UP, 1952.
- Olson, David R. "From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing." *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (1977): 257-81.
- Ong, Walter J. *The Presence of the Word*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1967.
- ____. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.

- Schmandt-Besserat, Denise. "The Earliest Precursor of Writing." *Scientific American*, 238, 6 (June 1978): 50-59.
- Scribner, Sylvia and Michael Cole. *The Psychology of Literacy*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.
- Tannen, Deborah. "The Oral/Literate Continuum of Discourse." In *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*. Ed. Tannen. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub Corp., 1982.

