

PLAYFUL ACTS OF IMAGINATION

DISCOURSE

Argument is not based on the world as it is, but rather on what the world might imply.

In her novel, *Precious Bane*, British writer Mary Webb has her heroine exclaim in Shropshire dialect: "It made me gladsome to be getting some education, it being like a big window opening." How many of our students, I wonder, would say the same? For how many of them, rather, would the word *education* carry the sort of connotations suggested by a sadistic contraption called an "education chair" as described in an 1865 *Atlantic Monthly*: "[it] compelled girls to sit bolt upright . . . by way of keeping their shoulders flat and strengthening their spines."

If we believe education to be, above all, "gladsome," we certainly keep it to ourselves. A 1980 survey of college recruitment materials and catalogues revealed the following as the stated goals of more than three hundred liberal arts colleges:

- 70 percent listed intellectual development
- 69 percent listed development of a student's human potential
- 58 percent listed job preparation
- 44 percent listed the acquisition of, or study of, values
- 40 percent listed broad exposure to varied fields of knowledge
- 40 percent listed development of religious values
- 37 percent listed training in basic skills
- 30 percent listed providing the foundations for life-long learning
- 29 percent listed developing the capacity for critical thinking
- 28 percent listed enhancing capacities for creativity
- 22 percent listed preparation for citizenship

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- 21 percent listed cultivation of aesthetic sensibility
- 19 percent listed training in research
- 18 percent listed development of specialized knowledge
- 16 percent listed exposure to other cultures . . . and so on, down to the utterly idiosyncratic, the majority of one. This list accords well with a similar survey from 1977, although the latter found more emphasis on preparation for "fruitful leisure," on "an understanding of the basic principles for cultivating physical and mental health" and on what was termed "consumer efficiency," defined as "sound choice of values relating to style of life."

As I read through the Babel of either list, I find no one insisting on something primarily "gladsome," something like "having fun," more particularly that sort of fun associated with the intellect and its all-but-limitless capacity for the analogous activities of experimentation, argumentation, imagination, and "fooling around."

Perhaps this is not surprising. Such publications reflect all too faithfully the institutions which they serve. By and large they are innocent of any joyous (or challenging) educational thoughts because their constituencies are bereft of the same. The literature rarely performs its central educational task, the articulation to the potential student of the essential differences between high school- and college-level work, because their institutions have rarely reflected on the same (except, perhaps, to complain about their students' secondary education).

Despite the myth held firmly by the majority of college faculties and writ large in *A Nation at Risk*, this widespread institutional malaise was not the result of the faculty giving the curriculum over to the students, but rather over to themselves in their new guise, not as teachers chiefly engaged in playfully enlarging the minds and per-

spectives of the young, but as recruitment representatives for the several disciplines and academic professions, engaged in focusing the minds and perspectives of the students so as to produce—quixotically, despite the actual vocational plans of the vast majority of their students—clones of themselves.

I take as my proof-text for my inquiry into the purposes of education a narrative I first learned years ago as a Yiddish vaudeville routine. It is a tale-type that has many variants within the complex world of Jewish humor, but one which I also have found, more recently, in a medieval Spanish Christian text and in a Japanese Zen version.

Moses comes before Pharaoh and says, "Let my people go." Pharaoh answers, "I'd like to, but your people are too dumb to survive off the reservation. But bring me your wisest man, and I'll question him."

So Moses goes out and grabs the first Jew he happens to meet, Abe, and brings him before Pharaoh, and the following dialogue ensues. Pharaoh raises his hand; Abe raises his fist. Pharaoh puts up two fingers; Abe puts up one. Pharaoh takes out an egg; Abe takes out an apple. With this, Pharaoh cries out, "Stop! No more! This is the wisest man I have ever met, wiser than all my sages and magicians. I'm convinced. Your people may go."

Abe, being no fool, quickly leaves, but Moses stays and addresses Pharaoh: "I don't understand. What went on?" Pharaoh replies, "Such wisdom I have never seen. I said to him that the world was flat and he said, 'No, it's round.' I said that there were many gods, but he said, 'There is only one.' I said to him that the world emerged from an egg, but he said, 'No, it evolved from a seed.'"

Moses then goes outside and catches up with Abe. Still puzzled, he asks, "Abe, what went on in there?" Abe replies, "I said to him that no matter what he decreed, we'd leave anyway. He

said, 'We'll stop you.' I said, 'We'll fight.' He said, 'If you think you can win you're jackasses.' I said, 'Up yours.' Then he saw who he was dealing with and decided to be friends . . . so he showed me his lunch and I showed him mine."

Interpreting and translating signs

It is almost a shame to ruin a good story by insisting on drawing a lesson from it, but I shall persevere. That which is "other"—be it the world, other folk, our own past—is like the major activity in the story. It sends enigmatic signs and our job is to interpret them, to translate them into our language as best we can. This is what both Pharaoh and Abe did, and their respective interpretations, though very different, are each thoroughly satisfying.

The interesting figure for us in the story is Moses (who serves as the paradigm for liberal learning, especially in the human sciences). He has seen the signs, he has heard both interpretations, and now his job is to translate the signs as well as the interpretations, and to decide between the alternative interpretations, to combine or reduce one to the other, or to propose yet a third interpretation of his own. It is, when you stop to think about it, a crazy endeavor, one in which not everything is possible, but one in which there can never be certainty. It is an undertaking more closely akin to play than work, an undertaking which most closely resembles that which ought to occupy every college classroom.

The difference between college- and high-school-level work lies primarily in the attitude toward word and discourse. In college, words are no longer thought to be expressive of things (in philosophical terms, they are no longer real); they are no longer vocabularies to be mastered or to be judged by the degree to which they conform to something "out there." In college, it is we who master words. Rather than evaluate the relationship of words to things, we evaluate

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the relationship of words to other words and to other acts of human imagination. It is a process that has many names, but above all it is known as *argument*. For it is argument that marks the distinctive mode of speech which characterizes college. This faculties need to remember, this students need to know.*

College is not a learning experience. Planaria, bees, mice, perhaps even machines, can all learn; that is, they can process information and retain it. They can discern repetitive, significant patterns on the basis of past experience. They can undertake efficient and effective action on the basis of such information and patterns. And, if these fail, in some sense they can innovate. But no other being than humankind, as far as we know, can argue and, therefore, be *educated* in the sense I am using the term. For argument is not based on the world as it is, but rather on what the world might imply. It is the world as refracted, no longer *the* world, but rather *our* world—a world of significance, of interpretation, of translation, and, therefore, of argument. It is a relentlessly social world, for significance, interpretation, and argument are impossible without other human beings. Even as words they seem strangely naked without their attendant prepositions. It is this "second environment"—the social, in contradistinction to the "natural"—that is the arena and object of education. For this reason, collegiate education (as its very name indicates) is always political and, therefore, must always be undertaken in a corporate setting.

The trained capacity for judgment

Behind such an understanding of education stands a set of presuppositions concerning knowledge and the way of the world. Chief among these is that the world is not given, it is not simply "there." We constitute it by acts of interpretation. We constitute it by activities of speech and memory and judgment. It is by an act of human will, through projects of language and history, through words and memory, that we fabricate the world and ourselves.

But there is a double sense to the word *fabrication*. It means both *to build* and *to lie*. Education comes to life at the moment of tension generated by this duality. For, though we have no other means than language for treating with the world, words are not the same as that which they signify. Though we have no other recourse than to memory, to precedent, if the world is not to be endlessly novel and, hence,

forever unintelligible, the fit is never exact; nothing is ever quite the same. What is required at this point of tension is the trained capacity for judgment, for appreciating and for criticizing the relative adequacy and insufficiency as well as the implications of any proposal of language and memory. This is the work of education.

The late gifted Argentinian author Jorge Borges said, "Reality may avoid the obligation to be interesting, but hypotheses may not." The difference is caused by the fact that we do not argue with the world, but with each other. We argue with one another's hypotheses, proposals, and interpretations, with the way each construes the world and its parts.

Although for me, Borges's word *interesting* is, perhaps, the most solemn and powerful word I can utter, it has suffered grievous banalization. We say, "How interesting," when we really mean, "Ho hum." "How was Smith's talk?" "Oh, it was interesting" constitutes a prime example of damning with faint praise. This notion of "interesting" is appropriate to that genteel social world constituted by gossip that was once characteristic of the liberal arts college conceived of as a finishing school. In this context, what is interesting is the unexpected, the slightly out of place. "Is he handsome?" "No . . . but he has an interesting face." "Isn't it interesting who the dean was with at lunch?"

This notion of interesting, furthermore, reminds me of those sixteenth and seventeenth century cabinets of curiosities that displayed a hodgepodge of exotica, arranged in pleasing, symmetrical, aesthetic patterns. Thus seashells, coins, fossils, a coconut, a shrunken head, a dried sea horse, and an oriental dagger would be juxtaposed with no reason except that they catch the fancy of the spectator. All these things were "real," but they were meaningless; they were insignificant in the strict sense of the word, for they told no story, they raised no questions, they demanded no decisions. They were inarticulate, or, at best, they provided an occasion for gossip.

There is another understanding of the word *interesting*, one closer to the original meaning of the word, which has been continued in the current legal and commercial term *interest*. It is this sense of *interesting*, rather than the gossipy, that is appropriate to the discourse of a contemporary college. For, in this understanding, things that are interesting—things that become objects of interest—are things in which one has a stake, things which place one at risk, things for which

one is willing to pay some price, things which make a difference. When a book, an idea, an object is found to be interesting in this sense, it is not because it titillates, but rather because it challenges, because it exacts some cost. Ultimately, it is interesting because it challenges the way in which one has construed the world and because, therefore, it may compel one to change.

In contradistinction to the objects displayed in the cabinets of curiosities, such objects of interest require articulation. They call forth speech and discourse, not gossip. They provoke argument. As such, they cannot be allowed to stand alone as isolated specimens or to be arranged in superficially pleasing patterns. They must be integrated into a coherent view of the world, or they must challenge previous proposals of coherence and integration. Indeed, things may be most interesting when they are capable of being construed in a variety of ways and when one may tot up the gain or loss of each proposal. Things are *interesting* in the fullest sense of the word when they exemplify, when they signify, when they criticize, when they entail—in short, when they are consequential.

A quest for paradigms

What we labor at together in college is the production of individuals who know not only that the world is far more complex than it first appears, but also that, therefore, interpretative decisions must be made, decisions of judgment which entail real consequences for which one must take responsibility and from which one may not flee by the dodge of disclaiming expertise. This ultimately political quest for paradigms, for the acquisition of the powers and skills of informed judgment, for the dual capacities of appreciation and criticism, might well stand as the explicit goal of every level of the college curriculum. The consequences ought to inform each and every course, each and every object of study. This is the work of education; it is also the work of the world and of life. Let students and the public and, above all, the faculty be told this clearly. This is the only sort of work for which college trains. It is more than enough.

We should not participate in courses in the natural or the human sciences in order, primarily, to train would-be practitioners, nor to provide a smattering of information to enliven future cocktail parties or produce better consumers of the evening news. As a teacher, I do not care if, months after some course, a student



no longer recalls what particular thing Aristotle or Durkheim said, if he or she no longer remembers what a virtual proton is thought to “be” according to some version of perturbation theory; but I would insist that each student gain some sense of the way in which the world is construed by each of the major domains of human knowledge and some sense of the arguments between them as well as what each entails for human life. What if human beings and the world are as the humanities or the social sciences or the biological or physical sciences would have it? What then? What would it be like to inhabit such a world? What modes of speech would one have to master in order to translate these rival proposals into each other's terms? In each of the central arguments between the major modes of human knowledge, one is confronted with a choice as to the implications and lineaments of possible worlds in which one might choose to dwell.

The issue for education is to describe the topographies and consequences of such interpre-

*Detail from
Dance,
from the
America
Windows series,
Marc Chagall,
1977*

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tative worlds and to learn how to negotiate, how to make responsible decisions between them. From such a perspective, if I were asked to define education in college, it would be that it is essentially concerned with argumentation. Education is argument about interpretations.

It is both wonderful and unaccountable, perhaps even comic or crazy, that sometimes our playful imagination, our arguments about and mental construals of the world, turn out to have real consequences. One thinks of a Mendeleev who, by sheer force of logic and an uncommon faith in order, was not only capable of organizing all known elements, but, in his revised periodic table of 1871, left gaps for those elements not yet known which he, nevertheless, accurately described. Each of these were subsequently discovered within the next twenty years, only because he imagined them.

The moral we ought to derive from such a seductive example is not that the scientists were "right" (this time), whatever that might mean. The moral ought to be that which I take as one of the prime rules of collegiate education: no one can be wrong. It's a rule similar to that formula intoned by generations of math teachers extending back to grade school: "Hand in your worksheets along with your answers, because it is not the answers that count, but how you got them." It is a sentiment echoed by one of the great mathematicians, Carl Friedrich Gauss, when he wrote, "I have my answers, I do not know how I am to arrive at them."

Some thirty years ago, an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about disciplinary problems in the New York City high schools was the stimulus that first got me thinking about teaching. A sidebar pointed out that students so labeled were not always lacking in intelligence and gave the following example. A teacher asked, on an exam, how students would determine the height of a very tall building using only a barometer. They were meant, I suppose, to employ the formula that pressure decreases 3.5 millibars for every 30 meters of ascent, but two students wrote a somewhat different sort of answer. One stated that he would go to the top of the building, throw the barometer off, and count how long it took to reach the ground. The other student wrote that, if it were a very expensive barometer, he would use it to bribe the superintendent of the building to tell him how tall it was. Both were suspended as disciplinary problems. I thought then (and I still do now) that each deserved the adolescent

equivalent of a Nobel Prize. The example made plain what teaching ought not to be; it suggested as well, although only by indirection, what it might be and that it could be fun.

It is inappropriate, perhaps, for a professor of the humanities to appear to be picking on the sciences, so let me choose another example. The professor of English who marks a student "wrong" for interpreting the line in Emily Dickinson—"Till Seraphs swing their snowy hats"—as clouds rather than snow and hence reads the poem, "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed" as being about death rather than seasonal change is exemplary of the type. Interpretation, like translation (the linguistic model on which the humanities is finally based), inhabits the playful world of the in-between. It can never be right or wrong, true or mistaken. It can only be more or less persuasive depending on the arguments and their implications.

Within the wordy world of the human sciences, the special form the constant negotiation between shifting perspectives of like and unlike takes is a cognate of the general educational principle, "no one can be wrong," as expressed in the old Latin tag, "Nothing human is foreign to me." It is this assertion that is the ultimate ground of, but also in some sense the pragmatic justification for, the endeavor of humanistic education as discourse with and translation of the "other," whether that other be conceived as spatially or temporally different.

It is this assertion which stands as the utter refutation of one of the most depressing public confessions that I have read, Meg Greenfield's Christmas column in *Newsweek* two years ago. She wrote: "I was deep in the morning paper when suddenly [I realized] 'The news from abroad has finally become totally and irrevocably incomprehensible!'"

If it be true that "the news from abroad has finally become totally and irrevocably incomprehensible," then we are in deep trouble indeed, both as citizens and as individuals concerned with processes of education. For what it signals is an abdication of the difficult responsibility to interpret, the refusal to inhabit the uneasy world of the in-between.

In recent times, the paradigm of this refusal was the Iranian hostage crisis and the figure of the Ayatollah Khomeini. As I was teaching at the time in one of our Western Civilization sequences (a term for me which includes both the ancient Near East and Islam), I decided to make the crisis the topic of my students' final class project.

What if we began with the required principle, "Nothing human is foreign to me"? What consequences would flow from such an assertion? We agreed on the following assumptions:

- Khomeini was not insane.
- Therefore, he must know that he cannot "win" (in our terms). That is to say, the hostages must ultimately be released.
- The daily press gave us ample reason to assume that the conflict, as seen in Iran, was primarily symbolic. The fact that a major resource was the daily press—and Ted Koppel—was crucial because it placed teacher and students on an equal footing with regard to data.
- We ventured the hypothesis that Islam might be interpreted as a "shame culture" meaning, among other things, that "face" would have to be preserved.
- Therefore, the rational problem for Khomeini was how to win symbolically (how to preserve "face") even as he let the hostages go.
- The issue, after much discussion, seemed to be primarily a matter of timing.
- We were able to determine that the date on which the hostages were taken was a deeply sym-

bolic date for immediate Iranian history. On November 4, 1977, the son of Khomeini was killed (it was widely believed by the Shah's secret police); on November 4, 1978, there were demonstrations commemorating the event at the University at Teheran during which thirty-six students were killed. On November 4, 1979, Iranian students captured the embassy and took sixty American hostages. The class argued that given the first two events, something like the third action was predictable.

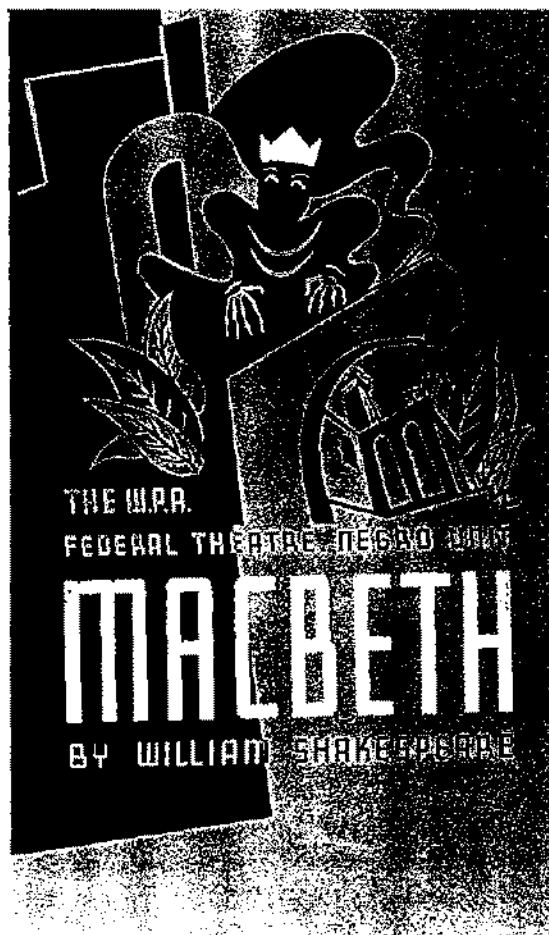
□ This allowed us to assume that the date of release would be likewise predictable, that it would be a symbolic date and one that would allow Khomeini to "save face."

Having agreed on this chain of reasoning, the class was divided into two groups. One explored symbolic reasons for releasing prisoners in connection with religious practices, research stimulated by a student recalling the alleged Roman practice of freeing a prisoner during Passover in the Gospel's Passion narrative. These students found a widespread custom of releasing prisoners on the anniversary of a king's birth or accession to the throne. In some countries, it was at Christmas (Christ being the king); in the Soviet Union, it occurred on the anniversary of the Revolution. While students were not able to prove this custom's presence in Islamic countries, they guessed that if it were followed, it would commemorate Muhammad's birthday, which occurs on our calendar during the week of January 13-19. Therefore, in early May 1980, they predicted the release of the hostages as not occurring before the week of January 13-19, 1981.

The second group researched the religious calendar of Shiite Islam in order to determine dates of mythical events and ritual celebrations which might suggest a propitious time for release. They found a complex pattern, one celebrated and reenacted in Shiite myth and ritual and encoded in the calendar. While the details are too complex to rehearse here, suffice it to say that the most sacred period in the Shiite calendar begins with the anniversary of their founder's martyrdom—their holiest day—and concludes, forty days later, with a feast of celebration—their second holiest day. This latter seemed most plausible. Again, the time period was the week of January 13-19 and so, in early May 1980, they predicted the release of the hostages as not occurring before January 13-19, 1981.

Once this synchronism became apparent, we went back to consider recent Iranian history.

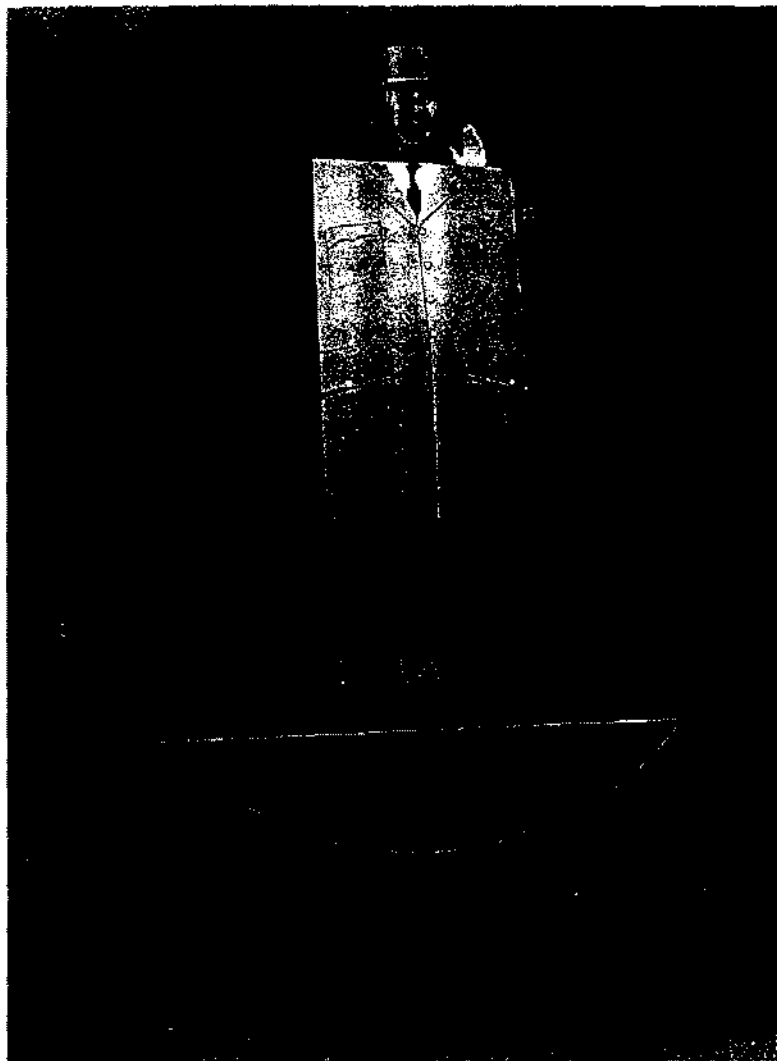
Macbeth,
Anthony Velonis,
1937



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President Charles
DeGaulle,
Matrisol,
1967

The fact that on January 16, 1979, the Shah was deposed made our guess seem all the more secure. In fact, we were slightly off. The agreement to release the hostages was announced on January 16, 1981, but a last-minute change in the terms of the agreement by the American banks brought about a delay. This caused a shift in the symbolic date from an Iranian calendar to an American one: the hostages were released on January 20, the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration, minutes after Carter was no longer president.



It little matters whether we were right or wrong, or whether we had the right dates for the wrong reasons. What is important is that we risked interpretation, that we hazarded a guess, that we refused to accept the premise that "the news from abroad has become totally and irrevocably incomprehensible," and that we, thereby, comported ourselves as responsible citizens—of both the academy and the world. In so doing, we undertook what ought to be the routine work of a college course. For collegiate education depends on, and trains for, the capacity to assume, simultaneously, differing points of view in order to engage in the interpretative enterprise and to reach some consequential decision. It is here, in such an in-between, that guessing and valuing finally come together. At times, this process may produce the "right answers"; at times, we will appear to have wasted our time. None of these is an inappropriate outcome; each is the precondition of the other. For a college education is governed, above all else, by Alfred North Whitehead's dictum: "Seek simplicity and distrust it."

What we celebrate in college is not rectitude. What we honor, above all else, are playful acts of imagination in the sense stipulated by Wallace Stevens when he wrote, "Imagination is the power of the mind over the possibility of things." We are, together, in the joyous business of enabling such power. On its attainment much, including the future, depends. In the undertaking of this task we stand charged, students and faculty alike, by the words of an ancient teacher and sage: "If not by us, then by whom? If not now, then when?" □

*I feel this so strongly that I have long wished that each college would send its admitted students, before they matriculate, a book such as Jack Meiland's *College Thinking*, which speaks directly, in its opening chapters, to such matters. Such would be a proper orientation to college-level work. I feel this so strongly that I tell the students in each of my classes that they will get an automatic F if they write in their papers phrases such as "merely a semantic difference," "merely verbal," "merely symbolic." For there is little else available to the human intellect but symbols. There is no other way of doing our work in that laboratory which is the classroom except by being scrupulously attentive to words and to matters such as semantic difference.