

The Incredible Shrinking Man
A Review of 'Print, Palaver, and Prime Time'

Ron Scollon

(Letterhead removed)

April 2, 1988

Peter Menard
Bartleby Press
754 Lost Mountain Road
Sequim, Washington 98372

Dear Peter:

Many thanks for asking me to review the manuscript 'Print, Palaver, and Prime Time: Public Discourse in Transition'¹ which you are considering for publication at Bartleby Press.

By all means publish it. (Though you might want to talk with him about another title—I'd suggest *The Incredible Shrinking Man* for reasons I hope I can make clear later.) It is a coherent book after all, though I doubted that at first glance, as you seem to have done as well. I agree that it doesn't really draw up into a bang of a conclusion but now after a careful reading I see that it can't, and shouldn't try to.

I was thinking of the Borges essay, it seems like it was in *Other Inquisitions*² in which he calls into question the belief started by Goethe that significant historical moments can be identified when they happen. That's all we get for television news anymore, everyone so sure they can discover the big event and be the first to report on it. Goethe would be disgusted.

Borges recalls the Chinese philosopher who argued that since the unicorn is a mythological animal which none of us has ever seen, if one did come our way we would have no means of recognizing it. I think Scollon's book is struggling to identify the same unicorn a lot of others are looking for.

We all feel times are changing and I like the way Scollon keeps coming at these changes from different perspectives; but it really is too much to believe that anyone is likely to do very well at predicting where it all leads us.

I think that explains the atavistic streak in this set of essays (can I call them that?) Unable to see how to go forward, Scollon takes us back again and again to a few things we know for sure; they are as old as our life on earth as humans; our food comes from the earth, our life depends on other life, if we don't watch out for these eternal verities, we'll be in serious trouble. That's what is most appealing about the book for me.

Peter, I've started out this way because I didn't want to leave any doubt in your mind that I think you ought to publish this book, pretty much as it is, warts and all. And now having said that I want to raise some questions I had in reading it that I'd really enjoy talking to Scollon about. They could be seen as criticisms of the book. I'd rather think of them as extensions; ideas I've had in reading the three essays and in thinking over what he's said there.

As you'll see, I couldn't resist from time to time wending in and out of Scollon's style, especially the style of *Time and the Media*. It started out as a normal review letter, but then got so long I thought I'd do better to package it up separately with this as a cover letter.

So there you have it. Thanks for giving me the chance to review the book. I think it'll do well for your press. By the way, my daughter wants to know if you called your press 'Bartleby' because you'd really prefer not to publish anything, or because you deal mostly in dead letters? Kids!

What follows now is my review of the manuscript.

What Makes a Book a Book?

I started in on this review by seeing if I could reconstruct Scollon's thesis throughout the three essays. I think it goes like this, starting with *The Problem of Power* (this one by both Ron and Suzie Scollon):

Power and alienation are both ways of talking about asymmetrically structured human relationships. Both of these concepts are artefacts of asymmetrical modes of communication such as writing (and now printing and electronic broadcasting). The solution to the problem of power posed by Schmoekler³ is to re-establish three fundamental relationships: our relationship to the earth, our relationship to each other, and our relationship to the past.

In other words, knowing one's past, one's place, and one's community are non-power-seeking ways of resisting the unilateral exercise of power. So the Scollons say in *The Problem of Power* that we should add a fifth category to Schmoekler's four responses to the exercise of power. Schmoekler says we have:

- Destruction
- Absorption and transformation
- Withdrawal
- Imitation

as our only responses. The Scollons add to these

5. Resistance and independence through learning the past, learning place, enlarging the future, and cultivating relationship

Incidentally I was, fascinated by the weave of arguments based on such apparently disparate sources as Dostoyevsky, language acquisition studies, Confucius, Athabaskan linguistics, and Gary Snyder. The quotations were of such length that I wondered if the Scollons have despaired of readers knowing the originals. The number of books I see these days with such extended quotations leads me to believe that authors really cannot assume a general readership now.

After this initial set of arguments, I see *The Axe Handles Academy* as an answer to the question I had in mind as I read the first essay: What would you do next if you really took the argument of *The Problem of Power* seriously? Apparently the Scollons have done that along with at least a few others. The Dauenhauers and Gary Snyder are interesting colleagues to have in such an enterprise.

In other words, *The Axe Handles Academy* doesn't advance the general thesis. I see its role as clarifying what the Scollons mean by learning the past, learning place, enlarging the future, and cultivating relationship. The first essay is largely theoretical and the second (the 'interview') makes the thesis somewhat more concrete (though sometimes I wonder how concrete Scollon ever gets). There is a comparative literature course they've developed and taught, a bioregional press they seem to have started up, a bookstore (they do love their books), and summer hikes in the mountains in their area. So they seem to be trying to practice some of their preaching.

As a rhetorical move I find *The Axe Handles Academy* really helps to pin down what the Scollons meant in the first essay. Without it, it would be interesting but quite unreal to imagine that their conclusion was even remotely workable in this particular world. I understand that Scollon is also on the school board and borough assembly in Haines. That certainly is one way to cultivate relationships! It would be nice to have his reflections on the processes of local government.

Time and the Media is my favorite of the three essays. A little further on I'll make a few contributions of my own to it. The thesis of this essay develops out of a sub-theme of *The Problem of Power*. As I read it, Scollon's thesis is that as we've moved from an ancient tribal life through an agricultural period down into the industrial and now the electronic ages, our sense of time has been changed first from cyclical time to linear time and then to a kind of flat perspective which he called flat time or point time. That sense of time is best observed in television. Paralleling this shift in our sense of time is a shift in our primary media of communication from speaking to writing to electronic devices such as the radio and television.

If you put this thesis together with the thesis of *The Problem of Power* you would conclude that the major means by which one exercises power over another is by controlling their sense of context (another way of saying you are controlling their sense of time).

The whole package is called 'Print, Palaver, and Prime Time: Public Discourse in Transition'. Although he doesn't ever say much about public discourse I gather that Scollon wants us to infer from what he does say that the three media, literacy (Print), the oral tradition (Palaver), and electronic image technologies (Prime Time) differ significantly in their power to control public discourse. I gather he believes that the most recent technologies leave almost no room for public discourse in any sense that would be recognizable to someone from an earlier age, say from the Enlightenment or the Renaissance, and certainly not from any one of the still viable oral traditions now living on earth.

What I draw from all this is what I believe to be Scollon's main point: Our world may be so different in actuality from the one we talk about every day that our language for it has become senseless. A really radical understanding of today's world may require nothing less than a new language in which to express it. He seems to suggest that meanwhile, we still live by eating the produce of the earth and we'd do best to make sure we guard that and our memory of the past while we watch for this future unicorn of change to show itself among us. It's sort of the reverse of the end of Voltaire's *Candide*: since we live in the worst of all imaginable worlds the best we can do is make sure we keep our garden cultivated.

I think these three essays are not only sufficient to make a book, they avoid a possible lack of nerve which would have obliged Scollon to either make some promises about the future I am certain he is not inclined to make (the difference between planning and preparation) or to tediously try to spell out why he can't make such promises.

Pinball?

There may be a contradiction in the general thesis of the third essay and the conclusion to the first that I want to explore. As I understand it the way you defuse a perceived power relationship is to 'enlarge the future' and 'cultivate relationship'. Both of these concepts are derived from Axelrod's *Evolution of Cooperation*⁴ according to the Scollons' footnotes.

The argument seems convincing when it is applied within a game but the question I have is whether or not it applies when you want to change the game. Tracy Kidder's book *Soul of a New Machine*⁵ talks about the young engineers who sign on to a miserable but ambitious computer job with their only real reward being that if they kill themselves getting it done they'll get to do another job just like it. He calls that 'pinball'. The only reward for winning the game is you get to play the same game again.

The world of potential ecological destruction and political inertia that Scollon is concerned about plays by a pretty well-established set of rules. These are the ones Schmookler outlines. Basically they all boil down to this: if someone exerts power in the system everybody is forced to use power (or to capitulate to power); you can't just ignore power. Isn't play in that game just pinball?

What *The Problem of Power* is trying to get to is a redefinition of the whole game and I question whether enlarging the future and cultivating relationship (within that game) will ever be sufficient to change the rules of the game. It seems to be a problem of logical typing. How can you change the rules of the game by playing within them?

The general thesis of *Time and the Media* seems to be that whoever defines the context in which communication takes place ultimately exercises power over the system. The power of television isn't so much inherent in the medium itself, it's an indirect power that comes to it because of television's power to control the context. Whoever controls television apparently controls contexts and that is the source of power, not the direct messages.

To put this together into a single frame, I gather Scollon would argue that to try to develop an ecological argument or a genuine public discourse on any topic by means of television would not be gaining you any power to redefine the game as long as the rules of the game (your context) were being controlled higher up.

What I would like to discuss with Scollon as a practical test of these essays is whether it would make any sense to make a series of, say, PBS programs for the *Axe Handles Academy*.

Would that be a complete sellout or would that be just what is needed? I'm not sure from what I've read what he'd say was the right approach.

The Manchus

We lack a very good sense of history these days—maybe for reasons Scollon gives in *Time and the Media*. I wonder what Schmookler would say about the Qing Dynasty in China. It lasted from 1644 to 1911. That's longer than the United States, so far. You'd have to say they were reasonably successful as a conquering and dominating power.

As I understand it the Manchus dominated China unilaterally and in the process became Chinese⁶. What is surprising to a Western mind (or at least to mine) is the reversal of what we take for granted; that the dominating power will also dominate culturally. Apparently the Manchus dominated the Chinese in order to become culturally Chinese themselves.

In the tug among concepts of time and media could such a thing be happening now? Could the culture of the electronic age, like the Manchus, be sweeping across what's known of the preceding cultural eras just to make it possible to adopt those older values as its own? Or is this just another unnecessary reification of concepts like culture?

Farmers or Nomads?

Recently a friend talked me into reading *The Epic of Gilgamesh*⁷ Though the epic is thousands of years old, going back to the period of the first writing, it seems so contemporary it left me wondering just how long it takes for one metaphor to drift into a new one. Gilgamesh, the hero of the walled city, Uruk, teams up with the wild man Enkidu to destroy the spirit of the forest and cut down all his cedar trees; Apparently this is the world's first documented clear-cut. Today the defense of the city in our imagination still seems to lie in the destruction of the forest.

Gilgamesh is a story from the earliest rise of agriculture on the Euphrates River (we think of it all being desert now). In reading this manuscript I was struck with the agrarian sense I got when Scollon writes about learning place. Maybe I read that in or it was because of his references to

Wendell Berry⁸, but I felt an implied criticism of transients and an implied valuation of long-term, and especially agricultural residents.

If you think about how most of us humans have lived until the agricultural period a few thousand years ago and how many of us have lived right up until recently, some form of nomadism is really what we're most accustomed to. An agricultural bioregionalism may be important, certainly Wendell Berry thinks so, but I wonder if we aren't really jumping on the wrong metaphor if we project our idea of the future on the model of Uruk. We might do better to pick some more nomadic metaphor to guide our thinking.

Panopticism

Reviewing this book has given me a lot to talk about with friends (I hope that's O.K.). I think there is going to be quite a snag in getting the *Axe Handles Academy* functioning, at least down the street here in our school. The snag I see is one of point of view as much as anything.

Do you know about Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon? This was his design for a prison (or a workshop or a school.) The design is based on an outer circle of cells with open fronts and a central observation tower in which the overseer stands, able to watch and control the behavior of each of the individuals in the cells while each of them can only see the overseer. If you've ever seen a picture of Sing-sing or Stateville prisons you've seen the perfect Panopticon.

In modified form just about every shop and school of the 19th and early twentieth century adopted this design. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*⁹ is the book which brought this to my attention. The plan, adopted so widely, is to allow the one in power to be able to watch over the activities of those under his (or her) control.

Our schools now are not physically built on the floor plan of the Panopticon but otherwise the relationships are the same. The student is the doer and the teacher is the overseer. We largely have John Dewey to thank for this; of course, he was an enthusiastic admirer of Bentham.

The Axe Handles Academy as I understand it builds on the opposite model; the teacher is the doer and the student is the observer in an apprentice role. So when Scollon advocates the teacher as a role model it implies something way beyond being a good person or even a good learner. It implies the teacher actually doing something meaningful in the life of the society so that the students have something to observe. A teacher wouldn't teach bookkeeping, a teacher would do bookkeeping, say in a local business or for the city council, and the students in that little task force would work along with him or her in keeping the city's books.

Extend this idea some and you can see that normal educational organization will amount to little teacher-student task forces going around working things out in their neighborhoods and communities. At least in the school down the street that amounts to a lot more than a conceptual reorientation or a new curriculum. I'm not even sure what role that building would have in an education like that.

In saying this I don't mean to suggest that I think it is a weakness in the book to not have pointed out just how radical a departure this all is from what we're doing now. I would enjoy a chance to talk further with Scollon about these implications.

Four-word History

Scollon likes three-word histories:

Story, argument, image
Circle, line, point
Oral, literate, electronic

Here's one of my own, but it's a four-word history:

Tribe, household, individual, role

Actually, I've been playing around with Scollon's implicit chart of the history of the ages; he never actually lined it all up on one place as I thought he might, though I can understand why he didn't—such things are so open to reification; and I have added a few details. I wonder what Scollon would think.

This got started by trying to think about authority in reading Bowers' book *Elements of a Post-liberal Theory of Education*.¹⁰ I think of authority as a kind of big brother. It's an answer to the belligerent question: Who says so? Authority is a kind of big brother you call in to give you some strength of influence beyond your own.

In traditional societies, the ones Scollon calls 'oral', the answer to why you should do something is this: That's how it's always been done. The authority of tradition derives from the past; This is the way things have always been done and should continue to be done. There is nothing better than a story to assert this sort of traditional authority.

I think Scollon implies a shift to argument or reason comes along with literacy. In a literate society the big brother question comes out like this: Why should I do this? Because of reason X, Y, and Z, and because we're all reasonable people. It is a logical argument that carries the day. The person is influenced by reasons and explanations, not by appeals to the past and tradition. This is the authority that John Locke uses in saying he will not follow any authority but reason and the evidence of his own senses.

At the beginning of this century Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*¹¹ foretold a shift to a third kind of authority. He revived the old Christian concept of charisma for this authority. He believed that European society had become so relativistic that there was no one left who would believe in reason and argument. He hoped for the rise of charismatic leaders who would challenge us to follow them just because of who they were.

Weber predicted the rise of the first charismatic leaders, Churchill, Stalin, Hitler, and Roosevelt. Charismatic authority answers the question of why you should do something by saying, 'Because this is my vision.' It doesn't seem any accident to me that this form of leadership arose with the invention of the major image technologies—photography and radio and then after World War II, television.

The fourth authority we've seen now is the public opinion poll. As I write this letter the 1988 presidential campaign ebbs and flows with the tides of public opinions. This is the authority of our newest technological toy, the computer. We've always had public opinion to deal with but never before has it been technologically possible to sample opinion so widely and so quickly. The answer this form of authority gives to my question is, 'Because the majority are in favor of it today.'

Here's how I chart this all out. Some of this is mine, some is reorganized from Scollon's essays, Yes, I am departing from my responsibility as a reviewer but this has been so much fun to think about that I couldn't resist it. It's become like an interesting conversation.

AGE	oral	literate	imagistic	information
ORGANIZATION	tribe	household	individual	role
AUTHORITY	tradition	reason	charisma	public opinion
TIME	rhythmic	linear	photo-montage	digital
MEDIUM	speaking	writing, print	photography	computer

FUNCTION	ratify	question	state	opine
TYPICAL HERO	Achilles, Strong Man	Don Quixote	Alfred E. Neuman	Max Headroom

Words Which Can't be Used

If a word is unrecognizable you can either ignore it or look it up in a dictionary. Trouble comes when a word appears to be one you know but someone else uses it very differently. This book (and this review) are full of problem words that maybe we should place under a ban for a while.

Media—at a workshop recently the leader began with the question: What is a media? Apparently 'media' is a singular, count noun; one media, two media, several media. The people in the workshop had no difficulty with answering; there are overheads, slides, handouts, blackboards, books, videos, and audiocassettes among other things. From their answers I gathered that for them 'media' means any unidirectional communicative conduit, a way of presenting a message to someone.

I was interested that they did not name such things as language, writing, or literacy. But also they did not mention the telephone which leads me to believe that 'a media' is basically a conduit operating in the active sender and passive receiver model of communication.

There is another meaning of the word 'media' as in the phrase 'the media' which seems to be a phrase to cover news reportage, especially television news. The media are the ones one makes reference to when complaining what the media have done to the electoral political process.

There is left no vocabulary for talking about the media in the sense of any complex or simple technological and social intervention in the construction of the relationship between people. For that there is no term. Because 'a media' is so strongly associated with the unidirectional conduit there is no room for the telephone which is bidirectional, nor is there room for personal letters, gift exchanges, and all the other ways people establish and maintain their relationships. Because 'the media' is so strongly associated with news reportage there is no room in which to conceive the psychological and social effects of soap operas, commercials, or National Geographic specials.

So the discussions of media must flounder on that empty shore for which the participants have no name, the intersection between our concepts of time and our ways of constructing our relationships and our sense of reality.

Image—for centuries this word meant any representation made by a human of something, whether real or imagined, a crucifix, a painting of a dream, a sculpture. Then along came the scientific study of perception, the eye, and Berkeley's philosophy. The word came to be used for what we call now the image on the retina. These two have nothing in common but the two meanings have fallen together. Recently we quoted an article to a friend. The article said that a person in a modern city sees more images in the course of a day than a 13th Century person would see in twenty years. The writer meant to say that we are now swamped by man-made images, including photo, print, and video images.

Our friend was confused by this and said that wouldn't a person at any time be seeing a steady stream of images (using the retinal meaning); one would see the fields, the sky, a house. Conflating visual image on the retina with a man-made image has led to this confusion. It could also make it difficult to see a fundamental difference between the 17th Century and our contemporary lives.

This comment doesn't even touch upon the problem of the 'image' a person creates as part of a professional or a political role.

Authority—This is one I've added to the Scollon list. Since John Locke we have been so anti-authoritarian that this word can only be heard negatively. We believe it to be our goal to free ourselves of authority, not to recognize the authority we use. Now one of the most potent forms of authority is transparent; it can't be seen; it is the claim not to have any authority.

For my chart above maybe I should have used the word 'credibility' rather than 'authority'. What would Scollon say?

Beyond Progressive Time

Peter, you are apt to be thinking that I've forgotten that this is a review of someone else's book. It is a common error of reviewers to fault a book for not being the book they would write. And it's especially easy to do after you've read the other guy's book.

I went into all of this and set out the chart to point up a possible problem with the idea Scollon leaves the reader with: it is an impression that time marches on inexorably from age to age, from technology to technology. It is easy to feel that the period of literacy is dead and now we should get on with television, or worse, computers.

There is a brief clue to how Scollon really thinks about this in the section *Escape from Time's Arrows*. There he asks whether we are stuck with one of the two arrows of time, a sense of decline from a golden age in the past or a sense of progress to some utopian future that we haven't quite gotten to.

There is some truth to this idea that reason superseded tradition and was itself superseded by charisma and public opinion; but we shouldn't fail to recognize that even in traditional societies all four of these kinds of authority have operated. A leader would use not only a good story but also reason and charisma to accomplish his goals. And these goals would be well tested against public opinion.

It seems important to me to acknowledge that no society or time is defined solely by a single organization or by a single form of authority, to mention just two of the categories I've put in the chart. Tradition constantly reasserts itself.

Edward Shils in his book *Tradition*¹² points out that even in science where the rule of experimentation and argument may be greatest, most of what a student learns he or she learns traditionally. We do not all set about to replicate Galileo, Newton, and Galvan's experiments to see if we come to the same conclusion. Much of that we learn in the most traditional way, being told by someone else.

If a section of Scollon's book could be expanded, that's the part I would like to see enlarged. We shouldn't look at this complex set of societal factors and think of them as coming in a sequence with each eliminating the former; that would be to view history from only the perspective of linear time, or as Scollon calls it, superseding time. We may finally be to the point where we can actually use all of these points of view in trying to understand ourselves.

The Incredible Shrinking Man Explained

I almost forgot that I was going to tell you why I thought this could be retitled *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. That has to do with my two additions, the problem of authority and my four-word history.

It seems to me that one of our biggest contemporary problems is authority. We don't know who we are nor what our authority for acting might be. But authority is a problematical word. Now I

think credibility might work for this concept. In traditional societies one's credibility came out of who one was. You were born into your credibility.

In that long literate period your credibility was established by logical argument (in theory at least—actually I think it probably derived mostly from your institutional position which itself derived maybe from your credentials and somewhere back in there you might have argued for your position). Whether or not, your credibility was actually established by logical argument, you still had to act as though it was, giving logical reasons for actions taken and the like.

By the period of image technology credibility had been reduced to a charismatic image; You are believable as long as you appear to be believable; blow your cool, let a crack open up in the face of your image, and your credibility vanishes.

Now we may be entering a period of even more ephemeral credibility, that of public opinion polls. You are believable just as long as most people believe you are believable. Credibility becomes something that is hard to come by, to say the least.

At the same time--maybe as part of the same process—our idea of 'man' has been badly eroded. We took our identity for the first eons of history from our tribe. It was a large identity, bigger than any one person. In time that shrunk first to 'the household by about 1700'¹³ and then with the Enlightenment we became isolated, autonomous individuals, components in the quickly developing industrial state machine. Now in recent times we've fractionated ourselves into a kaleidoscope of roles, none as big as a single person.

Put these two processes together and what you get is a concept of the person which is constantly shrinking in scope while at the same time becoming less and less believable—The Incredible Shrinking Man.

Final note:

I can see now that I've gone way beyond what this task called for (and what you paid me for). Let me say again that I think this is a fine book as it stands. Maybe the extent of these comments shows the stimulating effect of reading it. I would thoroughly enjoy reading Scollon's comments on my comments if that should ever be appropriate, though I understand your need to keep the review process confidential. I presume that you will remove any identification of the author of these comments from whatever you forward to him.

Best regards and good luck with this book, (Signed)

**Ron Scollon
Post Office Box 1149
Haines, Alaska 99827
(907) 766-2146**

April 15, 1988

Peter Menard
Bartleby Press
754 Lost Kountain Road
Sequim, Washington 98372

Dear Peter:

Thanks for sending me the extended and very interesting review of my manuscript P, P, and PT (as I have come to know it). Are you sure I can't make you violate the confidentiality of the review

process and tell me who wrote it? I have some guesses but this is someone I'd enjoy a conversation with.

I have a few comments on his or her comments, though as you will see, very few, and a few comments which will give you an idea of where I've gone with these essays since first writing them.

First my comments on your reviewer's comments.

I really like that chart. While I have only a drop or two of Teutonic blood that I know of the chart brings out all of that strain of scholarship that loves to see everything tidied up and pigeonholed. Of course the world never works that way--but it does give you something to reflect on.

One problem I see is shown up with the four-word history: Tribe, household, individual, role. I originally used a three-word sequence. If I were going to line up this chart I think I'd end up with five places. Starting with Tribe, household, individual, role, I'd say that the split between household and individual took place around the Enlightenment. Role came into place with the development of the image technologies of photography and radio and then television after the war. Then I'd want a fifth character for the present; something even more fragmentary than the role; maybe the single-issue opinion.

But then you'd have to go back and realign the rest of the chart. You'd want to break literary into manuscript and print literacy. You'd want to break authority into tradition, reasons, institutional position, charisma, and public opinion. Time might break into circular, linear, three-dimensional (with analytical geometry and calculus), point, and then maybe digital. For typical characters you'd use Don Quixote for the Renaissance literate character and maybe somebody like Ben Franklin for the hero of the Enlightenment.

Trouble is if you keep that up sooner or later you need a lot finer grid. You're up to the change-a-day world of the evening news. And I agree entirely with your reviewer's point that it's dangerous to let a chart like that seduce you into a linear (or a matrix) view of the progression of these types through history. It seems to me that at a particular time one of these possibilities gets highlighted, maybe under the influence of existing technologies and so it seems to be dominating that period.

As an example of what I mean, Weber dug out the word charisma because that was what characterized early leaders such as Christ and Buddha. When he wrote about charismatic leadership he couldn't have imagined the post-war world of nearly universal television which fits charismatic leadership to a 'T'. It's also easy to forget that charisma as it is used now isn't really talking about anything close to what was manifested by Christ.

While I'm on the subject of the chart let me comment on authority and credibility as well. I might also want to throw in a word like authenticity. The basic question I think is how do you legitimate your own life to yourself and in the eyes of others. That's a modern problem and the reason we've just come on this problem since, say, Dostoyevsky or Nietzsche is because of our shift away from the authority of tradition.

While we'd probably run from most traditional forms of authority because it is certainly anti-democratic, those old hierarchies gave people one important thing we haven't got—a sense of who you are. You don't have to get up every morning and argue it out with yourself and the rest of the world; You are who you are, that's it.

The constructed self—Today is the first day of the rest of my life—is liberating, it's exciting, but it's a hoax. We say that very phrase in the language of yesterday. The past is always with us and to me it seems more productive to look for the ways in which the old metaphors work in our lives

than to be constantly lying to ourselves about our supposed freedom from them. It must be my age.

The Axe Handles Academy. Is it really as radical as your reviewer believes? Maybe it is. If it is then let's get on with it, because I don't think we're doing very well right now. Throughout education we're miserable at thinking in any connected way. Everything is fractured into disciplines and within disciplines it is all parcelled out in pre-fab packages. That fractured curriculum makes it impossible to think ecologically, and that is the central task we've got to face up to.

Panopticism does seem to be the rule but I'm not convinced that that couldn't be reversed in a whole range of special projects that would fall short of needing a total reorganization of the school structure. Couldn't a teacher and a group of students (of course with permission of administration, school board, and parents) take on a task and just set about doing it? Of course, the recent Supreme Court decision that a school newspaper does not have First Amendment rights makes you wonder about how willing we'd be to let our kids and their teachers really undertake something serious in the society.

My main point with the *Axe Handles Academy* though isn't to lay out a curriculum or a structure for others to follow. What we're trying to do is find the right thing for ourselves and do it. If our theorizing is anywhere near being correct, that'll provide the model for others to follow as they see fit.

Bioregionalism—Yes, I agree that there was a tendency in my mind to think bioregionalism must be something like a return to the small rural town of the 19th Century. More romanticism.

The two biggest difficulties I see that face bioregionalism are figuring out what to do with our urban centers which have almost unimaginably exceeded the carrying capacity of the bioregions in which they have festered up, and making a distinction between some kind of 20th Century nomadism and what I think of as corporate homelessness.

Our reality is that very few of us live in the same place for more than a few years. It isn't going to happen that we'll all find that place we've always wanted to be and send down roots. So we need to give some serious thought to how to live nomadically and at the same time ecologically.

Frankly, I don't know how you learn place when everybody is changing their residence every few years. I believe though that our problem isn't our nomadism as such, it's our anti-ecological attitude. If you are accustomed to asking where your water supply originates you're likely to ask that wherever you relocate. It isn't really all that hard to find out when you think to ask.

Local government—Your reviewer is right. I ran for the borough assembly/school board (the same body) three years ago and to my surprise I was elected. It has been what is euphemistically called a learning experience. I've had to give a lot of thought to quite a range of problems. The whole idea is to subject my thinking to the day-to-day world of the elected public official and I thought I could do that best from the inside.

What I've spent most of my time with has been the point brought up by your reviewer—whoever controls the context has the power in a situation. In government in this country power is delegated or borrowed (it depends on your point of view). The local assembly has only the powers granted by the state. Our entities such as the library have only the powers we grant them.

Virtually every power question we've had to deal with was a question about context. Someone asks us to do something. We respond that that is not a power given us by the state. We are accused of disinterest, obstruction, injustice and the rest.

Now to reflect on the problem of power. I would say now that in any particular game the main action is in altering the rules of the game, not in straight play. If the game you are in is sitting in an elected seat on the borough assembly, the main power confrontation is not with others in that assembly, nor is it with one's constituents—it is with the political game at the state level. In the same way, one plays state politics by working at the national level. There are really two simultaneous games, the apparent internal game which plays by the rules and the external game about the context which plays around with the rules.

I would say now that dealing with the problem of power by cultivating relationship and enlarging the future works largely by applying those principles to the context, not within the same apparent game.

Does this mean that Schmookler is right after all? I don't really know. That's really a very big question. The view I take of power now could easily lead to a kind of escalating context climbing. If getting things to work at the local level means working with the state context and if that ultimately runs up against the national context, where does that particular buck stop?

The buck stops, all bucks stop sooner or later on the broadest contexts. What controls that context passes power down through the system. To me that broadest context is still the earth and our life on it. I still believe if you nurture that context you are working in the right place. If I could go back in a time machine and help to rewrite a phrase it would read 'We the earth'.

I'm going on much longer than I intended to in this letter. Just let me make a comment or two about the work I've done for the Alaska Humanities Forum because maybe that will explain where public discourse fits into this project—you may have noticed that it's in the title but not very prominent in the essays.

For a few years I've worked with the Forum on a series of public programs in the general area of literacy and education. Suzie and I wrote the first essay *The Problem of Power* as part of the process of developing a series of public roundtable talks. That set out our ideas as of that summer (it was 1985).

We sent it out to a group of scholars in the humanities to read and then a little later convened a meeting in Berkeley to plan the roundtable talks. Those discussions took place in the Fall of 1986 and the Spring of 1987. We flew around to seven different places in the state and held open public discussions on literacy and education (in the Fall series) and on workplace and homeplace (in the Spring series).

Those talks were fun for us and apparently pretty stimulating for those who were able to get to them. One weakness I felt we ran across in those talks, though, was that people weren't really prepared for the kind of discussions we had. I felt we went away from town in most cases just when people were really getting ready to talk.

Two projects followed on that, partly in response. In one of them Suzie and I worked with an independent radio producer, Jim Sykes of Western Media Concepts, to develop a series of five 30-minute radio programs for statewide and national broadcast. The programs were based on the materials of the roundtable talks which Jim Sykes had completely recorded at the time.

That series of programs is now finished under the title *Opening the Literate Mind*¹⁴ with the subtitle *Enriching the Cultural Literacy Debate*. Suzie and I also developed a discussion guide to go along with the cassette version of the programs.

Your reviewer wondered what I'd think about doing the *Axe Handles Academy* on television. This project was close enough to be able to say that it was rough doing it but I'd say now worth doing. I think we were able to get some core ideas and some essential language presented, and maybe push away at developing an awareness of some of the metaphors which are guiding our thinking.

The second project was *Print, Palaver, and Prime Time: Public Discourse in Transition*. That was the title of a proposal I wrote to the Alaska Humanities Forum for a program similar to the roundtable talks with two exceptions; one exception was that it only involved one scholar, me; the other exception is that I prepared the two additional essays *The Axe Handles Academy*, and *Time and the Media* as preparation for the participants in the public discussions as I traveled around the state.

The upshot of that project is that I've been around the state all winter talking to people about these essays and about public discourse. Public discourses on public discourses. You'd think that would give me something new to say on the subject, wouldn't you? Actually, I don't have much that's new, but I am quite certain of a few things I really only suspected before.

Here they are:

Literacy doesn't figure in very centrally in public discourse anymore.

Most participants read the essays but few went beyond to read any of the recommended readings. Very seldom did anyone make a reference to anything written in support of an argument or an opinion. Supporting arguments now seem to all come from television. There is a negative attitude to using the support of books; they are believed to be 'too academic'.

Public opinion is quick, ready, and largely unsupported.

My impression now is that most people do not feel any hesitation to speak their opinions, whether or not they have any background to support them. In other words, neither tradition nor reason are very central to the expression of opinions.

People feel politics are basically bad, at best a forum for expressing their grievances.

There seems to be nothing left of the Enlightenment idea that politics was the management of the everyday life of the society and the responsibility of all citizens. The idea that developed in these discussions is that the word politics refers to the election of public officials (and in this year mostly to the election of the U. S. President). People do not expect any government, including their most local governments to listen to them or respond to them. At the same time they place ALL responsibility for public affairs on elected politicians and accept nothing themselves as citizens.

Majority opinion is still virtually invincible, there is virtually no room for a minority voice.

Tocqueville wrote in 1835¹⁵,

In America, while the majority is in doubt, one talks; but when it has irrevocably pronounced, everyone is silent, and friends and enemies alike seem to make for its bandwagon.... I know no country in which, speaking generally, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America (p. 254-255).

I have read this to people. They have said that yes, that's how it is. They have then gone on in discussions to manifest this position.

Maybe the best evidence that Tocqueville is right is that when I ask people to imagine that things might be done differently they simply cannot think of any other possibility.

John Stuart Mill questioned whether the government of the United States would ultimately be viable and based his questioning on the problem of the tyranny of the majority. He wrote¹⁶,

It is necessary that institutions of society should make provision for keeping up, in some form or other, as a corrective to partial views, and a shelter for freedom of thought and individuality of character, a perpetual and standing opposition to the will of the majority. All countries which have long continued progressive, or been durably great, have been so because there has been an organized opposition to the ruling power, of whatever kind that power was, plebeians to patricians, clergy to kings, freethinkers to clergy, kings to barons, commoners to king and aristocracy. Almost all the greatest men who ever lived have formed part of such an Opposition.... The question, whether the United States, for instance, will in time sink into another China (also a most commercial and industrious nation), resolves itself, to us, into the question, whether such a centre of resistance will gradually evolve itself or not (p.167, 168).

Mill's point, I think, is that the opposition is an opposition to majority rule. What is unacceptable as an idea now is that someone other than the majority should be able to decide for others what is right.

The central value of the humanities in contemporary life is to form an opposition of the majority view.

The Alaska Humanities Forum has debated for some time about its role in public discourse. Following on Mill and Tocqueville I would think that the central role is to make sure citizens are aware of other voices, voices which do not speak the majority opinion. Majority opinion now is all too thin, formed in the instant of the electronic public opinion poll. If some form of real public discourse is to stay active in this country, someone will have to keep saying a loud, NO. Whatever the view you might take you must consider that there are other possibilities. That seems an eminently suitable role for the humanities in contemporary public discourse.

I could go on but I think this is enough to say that I'm pleased with your reviewer's response to the manuscript. Incidentally, I really like *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and would use it if I could get the reviewer's permission to crib that and the chart.

Every now and then I begin to think I'm exaggerating the demise of literacy; and the ascendancy of linguistic nonsense; then I get something in the mail like this advertising blurb for a new book from the 'Real American Movement'. The blurb says of their new book,

It is written in a non-textbook, contemporarily outrageous, intensely stimulating, daringly challenging, inspirationally motivating, and sometimes comically flip style which will re-create in the reader a state of mind similar to the one possessed by our founders¹⁷.

Parody is out of the question these days. Your reviewer is right, I don't have any idea where this is all going, but we are sure all being dragged along, aren't we?

Best,

Ron Scollon

Note: This essay was downloaded from the website of The Axe Handle Academy.
www.gutenbergdump.net/axe.
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¹ The three essays by Ron Scollon and Suzie Scollon are, *The Problem of Power, The Axe Handles Academy*, and *Time and the Media* (Haines, AK: The Black Current Press.)

² Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964) The particular essay is entitled 'The Modesty of History'.

³ Andrew Bard Schmockler, *The Parable of the Tribes* (Boston: Houghtin Mifflin, 1984). There is now a paper edition, same specifications, dated 1986.)

⁴ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁵ Tracy Kidder, *The Soul of a New Machine* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981).

⁶ Jonathan Spence, *To Change China*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1969). This book advances the idea that from the first Jesuit missionaries to China down to the period of Russian advisors, those who have tried to change China have either left China disillusioned or become significantly Chinese themselves. The 1980 edition contains a note on the Cultural Revolution.

⁷ N. K. Sandars (Tr.), *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Penguin Books, 1960).

⁸ Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon ooks, 1977).

¹⁰ C. A. Bowers, *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987).

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

¹² Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹³ Ruth Schwarts Cowan, *More Work for Mother* (New York: Basic books, 1983).

¹⁴ Jim Sykes (Producer), *Opening the Literate Mind: Enriching the Cultural Literacy Debate* (Anchorage: Western Media Concepts, 1988). More information on this series of radio programs is available from Sykes at Western Media Concepts, P. O. Box 100215, Anchorage, Alaska 99510.

¹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1969).

¹⁶ John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Benthan, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

¹⁷ One could hope that the state of mind of the founders was somewhat more stable than the prose of this advertising flyer. Scholarly citation in this case seems quite out of keeping with the style of this work.