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Correspondences Seven Broadside opinions and conversations al fresco

Dear Reader,

In this issue, Mariolina Salvatori addresses the matter of *cultural literacy*, E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s latest pseudo-concept, with rather more power to do harm than earlier ones like *readability* and *mission-oriented research*. Mariolina defines the hazards, developing a somber supplement to her essay "Reading and Writing a Text" (*College English*, November 1983), which is, in my view, the most useful and instructive consideration we have had since I.A. Richards' *How to Read a Page*. For Hephzibah Roskelly, cultural literacy, as conceived by Professor Hirsch, is a kind of infection we should learn to identify in order not to miss the concept of shared knowledge. She turns to an unusual source for support for her argument, finding it in the work of Michael Baxandall.

Writing teachers, as they come to think about theory and practice, are in a better position than anyone else in the field of English to reach an understanding of how we make meanings by means of meanings. This is an idea which perennially escapes those like Hirsch who take their guidance from positivist linguistics. Further problematizing of cultural literacy is welcomed: write me at the address below.

In the next issue of *Correspondences*, we will have a dialogue on the role of theory and a report on teaching writing at a theological seminary.

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"Cultural Literacy": A Critical Reading

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Although I share with E.D. Hirsch a deep commitment to literacy, education, culture, I understand these concepts, these issues, in ways that are radically different from his. Given the fact that one of Hirsch's consistent and powerful tactics is the polarization of issues—one is either an Ancient or a Modern, an intentionalist or an anti-intentionalist, an old hermeneuticist or a new hermeneuticist—my (radical) "difference" may constitute me in ways that are potentially oppressive and limiting. Thus, my intellectual disagreement both with the ways in which Hirsch arrives at the formulation of the concept of cultural literacy, and with the claims for its fruitful applications may automatically define me as an opponent of "cultural literacy," and *ipso facto* as one who is oblivious to, or unaware of, the educational, social, and political issues Hirsch has raised. The kind of literacy, education, culture I am a proponent of focuses on the learner's—that is, both the teacher's and the student's—continuous and unrelenting reflection on and critique of the act of knowing, but as John Warnock points out in his recent evaluation of the possibilities and the liabilities of "cultural literacy," Hirsch "is all but silent on...the nature of the learner and the relation of the learner and the thing learned." We must question this telling silence: if we let Hirsch frame the debate in terms of the issue of canonical information, we'll let his powerful tactics divert our attention from issues of greater import, such as the views of reading and of writing that cultural literacy may be said to enact and to promote, and ultimately the kind of literacy that it would foster.

I will try to foreground some of the rhetorical moves that enable Hirsch to present as incontestable certain truths that are neither self-evident nor unquestionable. Let me begin by reproducing an exemplary passage from "Cultural Literacy":

> But consider this historical fact. The national decline in our literacy has accompanied a decline in our use of common, nationwide material in the subject most closely connected with literacy, "English." From the 1890's to 1900 we taught in English courses what amounted to a national core curriculum....Then in 1901 the College Entrance Examination Board issued its first "uniform lists" of texts....This core curriculum, though narrower, became even more widespread than the earlier canon. Lest anyone assume that I shall urge a return to those particular texts, let me at once deny it. By way of introducing my subject, I simply want to claim that the decline in our literacy and the decline in the commonly shared knowledge that we acquire in school are causally related facts.

The force of Hirsch's argument here stems from his "historia docet" appeal. As the spokesman for history he

announces, instructs, claims. By the time he states "that the decline in our literacy and the decline in the commonly shared knowledge are causally related facts," his remedy—the adoption, though modified, of educational approaches from the past—seems natural and unquestionable. This is a masterful move: as Hirsch declares his nostalgia and respect for the past, he shapes his audience's response to be the same. But the move distracts us from the illogical statement that "the decline in our literacy and the decline in the commonly shared knowledge are *causally* related facts" (emphasis added): it is axiomatic that we cannot infer causality from concurrent events and Hirsch develops no sociological or historical argument to demonstrate any such *causal* link. To what extent does Hirsch's reading of the past *logically* lead to the remedy ("shared knowledge") he suggests for the future of American education and American democracy? Once we begin to question the ways in which he arrives at the diagnosis of the problem, to conjecture that the problem might be the result of a different set of "historical facts," the commonsensical nature of that remedy—shared knowledge—might no longer make immediate sense.

A reliance on allegedly self-evident truths characterizes Hirsch's repudiation of the literature/composition split he had advocated in *Philosophy of Composition.* In "Research in Writing: The Issues," Hirsch acknowledged that in his "campaign against putting literature in the composition course [he] had overlooked the obvious truth that teaching literature can mean, when responsibly done, the teaching of *reading.* And it is inherently obvious that we cannot write better than we can read." Hirsch's appeal to "obvious truth," to the "inherently obvious," exempts him from having to explain *what* a responsible teaching of literature would be, *how* this teaching would qualify as "the teaching of reading," or *what* that teaching would be like. However, since Hirsch is here suggesting that *obviously* one cannot write better than one can read, and since he has been quite explicit in suggesting how writing should be taught, I will conjecture what he might say about the teaching of reading from what he says about the teaching of writing.

After setting up an "imaginary experiment" in which teachers of writing would break down "the complex skill of writing" into "teachable skills," Hirsch avoids the controversy about growth in writing being "an organic process rather than an atomistic one" by suggesting that "it is fruitless to argue its pros and cons in our present state of ignorance," simultaneously claiming that research in psychology would support his argument:

> Learners have a very limited channel capacity at any moment of time. Their circuits can get very easily overloaded if they are asked to perform several unfamiliar routines at the same time.

What Hirsch accepts from psychology, and the ways in which he chooses to use that knowledge, suggests a view of learners who are easily incapacitated in their intellectual performances and who thus need their teachers to break down for them a complex skill into subskills they can easily manage. This premise justifies the argument that when students are confronted with the difficult task of reading an unfamiliar text, which they must understand if they are to write about it, they can benefit from relying on or being given a prior understanding of the text. *Whose* understanding that is to be, and *how* students are to use that understanding, are questions that turn out to be irrelevant within a pedagogy that seems to set up as its goals accurate, respectful (i.e. "unquestioning") and efficient transmission of information. One of the paradoxes of "cultural literacy" is that the democratic, egalitarian posture it would allow educators to take might conceal the elitism inherent in the discontinuous relationship Hirsch sets up between teaching *and* learning, teachers *and* students. This distance, I believe, creates an unbridgeable gap between "cultural literacy" and the "higher" form of literacy that, even Hirsch suggests (parenthetically), should be the aim of education. (CL, 166)

Hirsch argues that a student's familiarity with the topic she is reading and is to write about will give her an advantage that will contribute to her "easy competence in the linguistic sphere"; this is because that student's familiarity with the writer's ideas and positions on certain issues enables her to spend more time checking and correcting her "grammar and spelling—not to mention sentence structure, parallelism, unity, focus, and other skills taught in writing courses." (CL, 164) In other words, knowing something about the text she is to read and write about will decrease the "overloading" caused by her having "to perform several unfamiliar routines at the same time" (RW, 159) *and* within two activities. The time the student is saving by not having to interpret an unfamiliar text, she can invest in "revising" (i.e. editing) her own text, and compose a better paper. In this pedagogical context, one in which students are apparently neither encouraged nor empowered to raise critical questions about the possible liabilities of their familiarity with the subject matter, or to reflect on this situation, that very familiarity might foster mechanical, and cliché-ridden, thinking and writing. Paradoxically, the more information a student is given about the text she is to write about, the less that student can be said to be actually reading the text, since her recall and comprehension are triggered by her prior knowledge. It would seem, then, that in Hirsch's model the student's improvement as a writer is ultimately *independent* of her improvement as a reader, since her involvement with writing is inversely proportional to her involvement with reading: she spends more time checking her writing because she needs to spend less time checking her reading!

It seems to me that the kind of reading and writing that the program of cultural literacy might prevent is precisely the kind which has been responsible in the last decade for correcting the theoretical and institutional separation of literature and composition, namely the kind of reading and writing requiring a student to raise questions about, and to reflect on, the text she is reading in order to understand, to interpret, to critique, and to learn from the ways of knowing, the structures of knowledge which the text enacts. It is reading and writing of the kind that, in Freire's words, promotes a literacy that involves "an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context." This, I would argue, is the kind of literacy that can make a *political,* a *social* difference. But let me return to Hirsch's argument in "Cultural Literacy," and to *his* description of the kind of literacy that shared knowledge would make possible.

As if to stress the commonsensical nature of his claim about the advantages of "shared, canonical knowledge," Hirsch reminds us that teachers of foreign languages do quite naturally recognize the validity of cultural literacy, since they are aware that for their students "to get very far in reading or writing French, they must come to know facets of French culture quite different from [their] own." His next move is to translate this concept in even more familiar and universal terms as he reminds us that this "translinguistic knowledge" is a prerequisite to fluency for *more than* the student of foreign languages. The American child herself, as she moves from home culture to national culture, is confronted with the "foreignness" of "unfamiliar materials"—a foreignness that the school will eventually domesticate (the term is mine) through the process of "'acculturation' which is a universal part of growing up in any tribe or nation." And this is how Hirsch defines "acculturation": "Acculturation into a national literate culture might be defined as learning what the 'common reader' of a newspaper in a literate culture could be expected to know.... Acculturation into a literate culture (the minimal aim of schooling; we should aim still higher) could be defined as the gaining of cultural literacy." (CL, 166)

What kind of literacy would we be unwittingly promoting if we accepted Hirsch's definition? Clearly, when Hirsch argues for the educational possibilities of canonical knowledge, he is not thinking about the "functionally illiterate." He is speaking about the high school or college student whose poor performance on a reading and writing test he attributes to the student's lack of familiarity with the subject matter. The student, then, can read and write, but what she cannot do is to create knowledge as she reads and writes; nor can she raise questions about the text she is reading that may enable her to understand how and why the text is structured in that particular way; nor can she understand, and interpret her understanding of, the ways of knowing that text enacts so as to enact and to apply that understanding in her writing about that text. What the student cannot do is to function as a critical reader, precisely because, I would suggest, she has been taught or allowed to read mechanically, unquestioningly, unreflexively—that is, uncritically.

Over the years, Hirsch has progressively *re-fined* the definition of the kind of knowledge that cultural literacy would foster. Curiously, the more his description of that knowledge reveals the inherent limitedness of the learning model that would produce it, the more outspoken Hirsch becomes about the advantages of that limitedness for the efficiency of his program. In "Cultural Literacy and the Schools," for example, he defines the knowledge that cultural literacy would foster as "extensive knowledge" which, he says, "tends to be broad, but superficial. It is often learned by rote. It is mainly enumerative. It consists of atomic facts and categories. It does not put things together." Although this description may seem an acknowledgment and condemnation of the superficial and mechanical aspects of this knowledge, it is actually a rhetorical move intended to persuade educators to fulfill their "acculturative responsibilities in the earlier grades [when] children are fascinated by straightforward information," and to make "intensive knowledge [the] chief substance of the school curriculum, particularly in the later grades." Thus, Hirsch is suggesting that the extensive knowledge that constitutes cultural literacy would facilitate the attainment of intensive knowledge. But does intensive knowledge foster critical thinking? I don't think so. Although Hirsch describes intensive knowledge as "the ability to put things together"—although, that is, he finally seems to grant the learner "a stance of intervention in one's context"—this ability the learner apparently acquires from detailed study of the various kind of models a teacher chooses *for* the learner according to the learner's knowledge and interest. (The assurance that a teacher can be *flexible* in her choice of models seems to be Hirsch's attempt to pacify those who are concerned about the imposition of a canon.) No less than extensive knowledge, intensive knowledge suggests a model of learning that is imitative, osmotic, non-dialectical.

What is conspicuously absent from the view of reading that Hirsch's view of learning proposes and enacts is the focus on the reader's consciousness of herself as a reader and on the power she can gain from knowing *that,* and *how,* she can be the producer, the originator of a knowledge *she might want to share with others.* This is the most severe shortcoming of Cultural Literacy—a shortcoming that, I fear, will be inevitably translated into a pedagogy that will forever defer independent critical thinking, and will consequently produce an "in vitro" cultur*ed* literacy that will stifle, rather than revitalize, our educational practice.

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Redeeming "Cultural Literacy"

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In a recent article assessing basic writing programs, Mike Rose shows how loaded terms like "literacy" have excluded students from the academic community, noting that although composition students might be considered literate, according to some common definitions of the term, a significant percentage would not be, once we shift to the cultural and belletristic definition of literacy. Because students don't share with their instructors an awareness of a liberal arts tradition or the kinds of discourse the tradition accepts, they might be considered in fact "culturally illiterate." The nexus Rose creates between basic writing and cultural literacy is appropriate in a more general discussion of the concept; basic writers and their illiteracy in the academic culture initially fueled many of the arguments for inculcating cultural literacy in the composition classroom. Indeed, Rose indicates that many universities still believe that basic writing programs are only temporary fixtures, and this belief—"the myth of transience"—mirrors Hirsch's nostalgic wish for the good old days when there was no need for guarantors of literacy; when knowledge seemed to be shared in a community of complete understanding.

Of course, nostalgia has a way of airbrushing in facts. As Rose's short history indicates, "remediation" programs, including freshman composition, have been part of English departments for more than a century; knowledge was never as equally parcelled out as Hirsch would like to believe. Were we to return to a curriculum of required readings and preferred interpretations, such as the one he advocates, our students would be no more "culturally literate" than those students in 1845 who elicited the frustrated remark of Brown University's president: "Students frequently enter college almost wholly unacquainted with English grammar . . . ."

We can't return, even if we would. Our conception of literacy has had to shift with changing student and teacher groups and with the society that produces the learner and the system in which she learns. The very existence of basic writing programs in a university is in recognition of literacy as culture-bound, and that belief has had demonstrably positive results in enfranchising students from divergent backgrounds. But Mariolina Salvatori worries that to encourage cultural literacy as Hirsch defines it is to nurture a passive notion about learning that places authority completely outside the learner, and to propound an elitist educational philosophy that blocks the responder from making her unique context a part of her learning. An insistence on cultural literacy could become a new way to exclude, not enfold, students, to assure that they are kept from participation in the academic community.

The argument about cultural literacy seems to pivot on shared knowledge, who has it and how it gets shared. Hirsch's plan assumes that teachers are to provide and organize knowledge for students. Knowledge is shared in one direction—from the front of the classroom—and it is shared bit by bit. The teacher/critic pulls students toward cultural literacy by filling them with strategies for finding the intrinsic genre faithfully embedded in the text. Readers ingest, skill after skill, and discover meanings with increasing accuracy. We know the problems with skill-building theories in composition textbooks that build from sentence to paragraph to theme or from narration to description to argumentation. When your attention is placed solely on piling blocks, you never look at the structure you're piling. Hirsch's model is similarly flawed, for it fails to give readers a way to stop piling the blocks and reflect on shared experience as critical thinkers. If Hirsch doesn't explicitly deny critical thinking, he equates the best critical thinking and the most adroit (and inherently uncritical) approach to a predetermined body of knowledge. In this environment, Salvatori's foreboding of the death of critical thinking seems justified.

For Hirsch, shared knowledge is grounded in a kind of homesickness, a longing for a remembered and better past where all readers made the same assumptions and rendered the same valid meanings. But reading is never an exclusively collective act; Frank Smith and others show us that it is in

fact highly individual as well. Because unshared knowledge is an undeniable fact, reading must vary, interpretations diverge. The variety of critical avenues to meaning show validity to be intrinsic wishful thinking. But we don't need to disclaim cultural literacy, or a concept of shared knowledge, simply because we disclaim Hirsch's lament for a homogeneous past. We need to learn how to make the divergences and variations in our knowledge functional elements that provide for shared knowledge and culturally literate reading and writing.

If we rescue the term and place it in a new, semantically clean setting, "cultural literacy" can name a workable teaching goal. Scrubbed of all its associations with standard book lists, recommended interpretations, didactic teaching, a redefined cultural literacy becomes culturally responsible. I think Michael Baxandall's 1972 study of fifteenth-century painting provides a true hermeneutic vision of cultural literacy that composition teachers can use to reenvision the epistemologies they teach. A picture, Baxandall explains, is sensitive to the kinds of interpretive skill the mind brings to it:

> Some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his experience. Among these variables are categories with which he classifies his visual stimuli, the knowledge he will use to supplement what his immediate vision gives him, and the attitude he will adopt to the kind of artificial object seen (40).

Interpreters use the skills they possess, those that seem most appropriate, those the "culture esteems highly." The conformity between what seems to be demanded and how the beholder discriminates accounts for "taste," for the sensibilities that direct both interpretive agreement and divergence. The leap from reading a painting to interpreting a text is not great. Responders (readers) interpret based on variable, culture-based capacities and bring knowledge of their own to supplement or enrich what the immediate vision provides. Baxandall makes literacy, the ability to interpret signs, intimately bound to the culture which determines it; he allows us to understand the relationship among perceiver-perceived-culture as both interdependent and complementary.

Furthermore, Baxandall's definition shows us how to reconcile the concepts of shared knowledge and critical thinking within the larger framework of cultural literacy. Such a newly-defined idea demands from responders, both teachers and students, a consciousness of their roles as interactors between texts and the cultures they inhabit. It requires, in other words, a reciprocal questioning that leads to hypothesizing, challenging, re-seeing, interpreting, and sometimes, agreeing. Shared knowledge results from the critical thinking that such personal and group negotiation requires.

If we redefine shared knowledge as the result of critical thinking, we encourage an authentic cultural literacy. The shared knowledge we should be after entails a Freirean attitude of "creation and re-creation," an intervention in one's personal and cultural context and in the texts one reads and writes. Shared knowledge does not proceed from the familiarity with texts or types of texts that Hirsch recommends. If familiarity with the texts one reads allows greater facility in revising the texts one writes, it can also foster the clinched or mechanical response Salvatori fears. Worse, it may result in an "illiteracy" Hirsch seeks to prevent: readers who are very familiar with a text or a text's type easily misread it because they fill in the blanks with their own expectations so readily.

Last year, my freshman composition class read an excerpt from Richard Wright's *Native Son,* anthologized as the short story "Flight." The plot is part of every television watcher's repertoire; from Jimmy Cagney to Cagney and Lacey, the police chase scene has remained constant enough to be part of our "shared knowledge." Bigger, running from the police, hears sirens in the street below, climbs to the apartment house roof and then to a tower, hides, confronts, is taken prisoner. Propelled by their familiarity with this scene, readers often misdirected their attention, omitting much of the story in their interpretations of the text. They missed details of Bigger's background, the lessons in courage from his father that compel him, the inner fears that characterize him. Their shared knowledge, in fact, subverted their interpretive powers rather than strengthening them. They needed to defamiliarize the context in order to

experience the richness of the drama Bigger plays out.

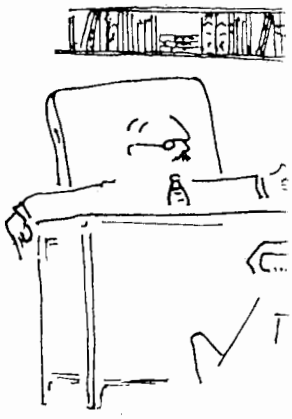
Still, withholding background information of a text to force imaginative involvement is no alternative. Ignorance prevents critical thinking as effectively as over-familiarity. When the information teachers give students provokes interaction and reflection, the experience of the text deepens with the repertoire. To let readers know that Kate Chopin wrote in New Orleans at the turn of the century and that her work was rediscovered during the feminist movement of the Sixties does not compromise the experience of reading *The Awakening.* To let students know that the police-story perspective in "Flight" might make them move too quickly through the text is to strengthen their inquiry, to empower them to interpret. This context-sharing does not make students read less, but more. But it is an activity directly opposed to the search for validity that Hirsch demands. Teachers must be quite clear about how to aim toward cultural literacy through critical thinking if we are to avoid Hirsch's prescribed intentionality or the passive familiarity Salvatori fears.

The re-creation and negotiation that characterizes the best critical thinking is neatly explained by the anthropologists' description of experience-near and experience-distant concepts. An experience-near concept is a spontaneous, effortless description that reflects a person's direct, unreflective engagement with observed behavior, while an experience-distant concept attempts to explain behavior by speculation and analysis. The challenge for the anthropologist, according to Clifford Geertz, is in separating ideas and experience, translating experience-near to experience-distant concepts. Our students continually alternate experience-near and -distant concepts as they involve themselves in a text—merge with it—and simultaneously negotiate that involvement. They re-create their experience in order to talk or write about it. I suggest the power of the experience in reading and writing comes in translation, in a dynamic process of experiencing critically.

A student who reads "Flight" has to transform her experience-near concept of the police action drama into an experience-distant one, thus reshaping the plot into a symbolic enactment of a complex philosophical and emotional dilemma. Experiencing the story, transposing the experience through their own decisions, students engage in a hermeneutic knowledge-building where what they think becomes productively and inseparably linked to who they are. This negotiation of experience becomes a heuristic for all reading and writing experiences, even those which begin as experience-distant concepts. In a Beckett story, for example, students are confronted with no plot and organization by digression. But their consciousness about how interaction directs interpretation helps students ask questions of their experience with the text, and this questioning brings the distant concept close, so that it can be recognized and reshaped in analysis. The tools readers hold shape the questions they want to ask; we promote cultural literacy by showing students how their interpretations are determined by their own speculative instruments.

How does this concept of critical thinking and cultural literacy in reading connect to students' writing? Primarily, we must more coherently define—or undefine—the kinds of discourse that proceed from reading assignments. Students do not need to write about texts they read in order to find those texts "useful." Reading supplies far more than the subject matter for writing, and teachers must make that connection tangible in the classroom by stressing the similarity of both acts, and their symbiosis. As we encourage students to question as they read, we give them the tools for manipulating their own writing. Reading and writing are not balanced on scales, as Hirsch implies, where the more time we take to read, the less we take to write. They are not inversely proportionate activities at all; the more productive time spent in reading, negotiating, evaluating, the more productive time spent on those same activities in writing. We give students the power to write critically as we invite them to think critically as they read, and we assert a cultural literacy that presumes the questioning mind.

In *Validity in Interpretation,* Hirsch acknowledges a two-stage process of meaning-making, the first an intuitive guess and the second a testing of the guess. Hirsch exempts entirely the first moment from his discussion, claiming it to be sympathetic and unmethodical and consequently undiscussable. Yet he admits that the second moment, that of validation, is completely dependent on the first, though it raises the first moment to the "level of Knowledge." What Hirsch claims about cultural literacy ignores that essential first moment, the crucial element in responding to texts.



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Negotiating between the poles of textual and reader authority and the culture surrounding both, readers divine, take the imaginative leap into meaning. The first moment is not unapproachable because it is sympathetic; its sympathy and intuition make it a point of shared experience in interpretation. Meaning is not separable from the individual act of creating it, but individual acts can become shared contexts in a process of questioning meanings. The first moment is the one we must approach and make room for in a classroom that defines cultural literacy as an imaginative and critical inquiry.

Negotiate question re-create: these are words antithetical to Hirsch's recurring *reliable methodical valid.* Hirsch's literacy locates an objective, invisible standard to authorize its procedures and distinctions. True cultural literacy sets its own standards and relentlessly questions them. We need to rescue cultural literacy from Hirsch, to reaffirm it as we share the knowledge we have created in our individual and communal struggles with both our texts and ourselves.

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