Dressing 'Cultural Literacy' for Success: Some Thoughts on Hirsch's List

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DISCURRENDO

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THE REAWAKENING OF THE NEW SOCIETY FOR LANGUAGE AND RHETORIC

The New Society for Language and Rhetoric lives again. The New Society, which began some years ago as the Great Lakes Area Rhetoric Association, began a two-year hibernation in the spring of 1985, but a burgeoning interest in the history and theory of rhetoric, both in the Chicago area and across the country, has snatched the Society from the arms of Morpheus.

The new life of the New Society will take two forms. The first will be biannual meetings, featuring nationally prominent guest speakers on language and rhetoric. The first of these meetings for academic year 1987-88 was held in September, when Patricia Bizzell of the College of the Holy Cross addressed the Society on the topic, "What is a Discourse Community?" The second meeting for this year will begin at 9 a.m. on Saturday, May 7, 1988, in the Illinois Room of Chicago Circle Center on the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. Ann E. Berthoff, formerly of the University of Massachusetts-Boston and author of The Making of Meaning and Reclaiming the Imagination will speak on the topic, "Ramus Meets Schleiermacher and They Go Off for a Triadic Lunch with Pierce; Vico Drops By." The morning session will begin with coffee and rolls; Berthoff’s address and questions will run until around 11:30 or noon. We’ll adjourn to local restaurants for lunch and then reconvene in small discussion groups from 1:30 to 3. From 3 to 4, we’ll reassemble and discuss the day’s events. To help us recoup costs, we must charge a $5.00 registration fee for this meeting. Please clip and mail the form below, along with your check for $5.00, or simply come to the meeting on May 7 and register at the door. At the May 7 meeting, we’ll discuss plans for biannual meetings in academic year 1988-89.

The second form of New Society life is this quarterly newsletter, Discurrenendo. As the accompanying preface points out, each issue of Discurrenendo will focus on a single text, defined in
Hirsch's suggestions to the contrary, most of us—even those who can't identify "Vichy" or "Volga"—effectively and efficiently discourse with school, the power company, the law, the department store, the IRS, and the garage mechanic, but only with great effort can face the undistracted moment alone (or even alone together) when we must confront how we live and the ground beneath shifts and for good and bad anything can happen. We can sympathize with Hirsch when he mourns our "dispersed" culture and our "fragmented" selves and understand his aching for something we could hold to.

**DRESSING CULTURAL LITERACY FOR SUCCESS: SOME THOUGHTS ON HIRSCH'S LIST**

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According to reports that appeared in the press, the popular success of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* simply astonished both E. D. Hirsch and his publisher. They were delighted, of course, but also overwhelmed, humbled, awed by the power of ideas and by the legendary good sense of the American people, and so on. This touching incredulity notwithstanding, I'd like to question whether the book's success is really so surprising, or whether certain of its features weren't calculated to capture precisely the kind of celebrity it has achieved.

Consider the book's title, for example. Its rhetoric sounds familiar, does it not? Indeed it should for it rehearses the same strategy that launched the self-help genre into bestsellerdom. It exploits the reader's anxieties ("Are you sure you know what you need to know?")], compounds them ("If your knowledge is insufficient, aren't you, perhaps, insufficiently American?")], and finally promises to alleviate them ("Relax: this book tells you what you need to know."). Such rhetoric would not ensure the book's success, but it does show that Hirsch sought to benefit from a form at odds with the call to seriousness of his own agenda.

Consider, also, "The List"—Hirsch's attempt to itemize "What Literate Americans Know." In an era in which the idiom of authority, be it political, religious, or economic, bears the indelible stamp of "The Great Communicator"—an epithet Reagan has earned for ridding issues of their bothersome complexity and reducing them to their piths and gists—is there any ploy more likely to gain currency than a list that seems to provide such a convenient and manageable cultural crib?
Yet, in his rush to consolidate the contents of cultural literacy—a project he means the list to serve—Hirsch overlooks the effects of the list as a form. Throughout his book Hirsch denounces the influence of form in the curriculum as a villainy perpetuated by the erroneous education theories of Rousseau and Dewey—erroneous because they promoted students' mastery of skills (form) rather than any particular content. But form—inevitably inextricable from content—cannot simply be wished away. By attempting to do so, Hirsch blinds himself to the crippling inconsistencies of his book.

Because of its nature, list-making will not suit Hirsch's purposes. It is, after all, a kind of entertainment—a diversion exemplified by the best-dressed lists, top ten lists, and books of lists with which we are familiar. Doubtless, Hirsch recognizes this but once again his confidence that he can deploy a popular form to transact the serious business of preserving literate culture without invoking the limitations of that form is misplaced.

Hirsch presumes his list will reflect the cohesiveness, the constitutive core of literate culture if it contains the right bits of information. To remedy any oversights he need only add new items. Thus he appeals to readers to recommend other candidates for the list that may have escaped his attention. But this activity is futile. The problem lies not in omitting essential items but in thinking a list can meet the task. A list grows by accretion. It is an accumulation of disparate bits and as such cannot re-enact the associational schema that Hirsch proposes in chapter two as the paradigm of cultural literacy. The culture it reflects is necessarily fragmentary, not cohesive.

Furthermore, a list suppresses the complexities that attend each entry because it withholds context. What, for example, is the context of "dumping"—one of Hirsch's entries? Without access to a particular context, we cannot decide which meaning of the word Hirsch wishes to designate. How, then, can we judge if this word truly signifies a concept crucial to cultural literacy? Clearly, we can't. Nor does Hirsch wish us to. By virtue of his using a list, he betrays his desire to circumvent debate about the contents of cultural literacy. His real aim—for this is what the list is designed to do—is to win our undiscriminating adherence to these contents. But what conception of culture informs them? To what does Hirsch attempt to win our adherence?

For Hirsch, literate culture is a compendium of "value-neutral" "accidents" that carry no trace of class or ideological bias. Their inclusion in literate culture results from sheer historical happenstance. Accidents have no inherent worth, but become important and worth knowing because by chance they stick in the memories of literate members of society. In this way they
gain general currency because literate people share them and perpetuate them. This view is suspect on two counts.

First, Hirsch's scenario hardly illustrates that literate culture is classless. Rather than make the power cultural literacy confers available to all—as he claims to do—he grants it only to those who subscribe to his version of culture. Knowledge that derives from and confirms experience other than that for which Hirsch's literacy accounts has no merit, no legitimacy. The so-called nonliterate members of society must learn what the literate members know solely because they know it, not because it has any inherent value. This makes the origins of power even more intimidating and mysterious than before. What literate people know constitutes what is worth knowing. The power they confer upon themselves is unassailable because there is no other legitimate base of power from which to attack it. Such attempts to downplay the influence of class and ideology merely demonstrate how pervasive and potentially oppressive it is.

Second, the view of history that informs Hirsch's notion of culture is untenable. That the list's entries could feasibly be value-neutral and accidental presupposes that history treats all events and individuals equally, as if some objective, omniscient, ubiquitous video cam could capture for all posterity all that happens. But history comprises the recording and interpretation of events, not the events themselves, and it is people—with all their individual and cultural biases—who record and interpret them. What they record and in what light they choose to record it is hardly accidental.

The history of Mason Weems's fictional account of the young George Washington chopping down his father's cherry tree is a case in point. Despite Hirsch's assertion to the contrary, there is little accidental about it. As Hirsch himself tells us, Weems fabricated the story to make Washington a more convincing vehicle with which to convey moral instruction to the nation's youth. Hirsch would have us believe that this story survived by chance when, of course, it survived only because teachers, school administrators, and publishers found it useful and perpetuated the story and its moral lesson in their classrooms and textbooks. Had the story not suited their ends, it would have vanished from the national memory. The currency of this story testifies to the power of institutions to preserve and create culture. It is neither accidental nor surprising—given the moral the story teaches—that this fictional episode has survived. For similar reasons it is not surprising that a book like Hirsch's has created the splash it has. Its moral—that cultural power belongs in the hands of those whom the culture already empowers—predictably has won endorsements from the mandarins of industry and government: funding from Exxon and hosannas from Education
Secretary William Bennett. Such official approval and the popular power of certain of its formal features have contrived for Cultural Literacy a success that should surprise no one.