

CULTURAL LITERACY AND THE ANALOGICAL IMAGINATION

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I

In his much discussed, often misunderstood book *Cultural Literacy*, E. D. Hirsch analyzes America's failure to achieve a higher degree of literacy and offers a prescription for rectifying the situation. The key points in Hirsch's book might be summarized as follows.

- First, true literacy requires, beyond basic reading and writing skills, the common body of information that is possessed by the general society.
- Second, it is the responsibility of the schools—especially of the elementary schools—to impart this shared information.
- Third, to dismiss such education as elitist or as indoctrination is to fail to see it as empowerment, for only the culturally literate can hope to effect social reform.
- Fourth, education must involve a two-part curriculum: extensive (covering the shared information) and intensive (allowing for in-depth exploration of individual texts or specific areas of knowledge). This two-part curriculum “avoids the idea that all children should study identical materials. It also resists the idea of a core curriculum, if that proposal is taken to mean that all high school graduates should study, say, *Romeo and Juliet*” (128).
- Finally, the shared information of literate adults is “typically elementary and incomplete[,] . . . extensive but limited,” though such information is retained only if vividly encountered in some context, which makes possible

associations with other information (127).

My summary does not, of course, do justice to Hirsch's fine book, and for that I apologize. Moreover, the brevity of this article precludes my recognizing in any detail the clarity and cogency of his arguments. He has accurately analyzed a problem; his prescription is sound as far as it goes; and his goal of cultural literacy is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Still, something more must be aimed at, and that something more is the subject of this article.

II

"What such a curriculum is inadequate for is the fostering of the creative intelligence."

The two-part curriculum proposed by Hirsch—extensive and intensive—seems admirably suited to developing the interrelated skills of cultural literacy and critical thinking. What such a curriculum is inadequate for is the fostering of the creative intelligence—a power necessarily rooted in the analogical imagination, in the ability to recognize similarities without losing sight of differences.

This analogical imagination includes the poetic faculty, generative of metaphors, of symbols, and of fictions that externalize for contemplation the inner experiences of humankind. Ralph Ellison bestowed this gift on his Invisible Man, who found himself not only in a world of possibility but also in a world of correspondences: "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you?" (503).

This analogical imagination is also the faculty responsible for major breakthroughs in theoretical science, as Jacob Bronowski points out in two superb essays—"The Reach of Imagination" and "The Nature of Scientific Reasoning." He writes: "I doubt if there is much to choose here between science and the arts: . . . The power that man [sic] has over nature and himself, and that a dog lacks, lies in his command of imaginary experience. He alone has the symbols which fix the past and play with the future, possible and impossible" ("The Reach of Imagination" 199).

Finally, the analogical imagination is the faculty by which we can envision a new society in which the evils of the present will be ameliorated or at least exchanged for lesser evils. Thus, for Percy

Bysshe Shelley the creation of a new society is the crowning achievement of the poetic imagination: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (1146). Thus also, in our own day, for Amiri Baraka: “The largest work of art is the world itself” (7). If our children are to go on to form a better society, as Hirsch believes is their responsibility, they must be able not only to critique the present society, but also to envision a new one.

At this point, two objections might be raised in Hirsch’s defense: (1) that he does indeed regard mastery of analogy as important and specifically alludes to it twice in *Cultural Literacy* (108, 122); (2) that, as he replied to Paul Armstrong (*Profession* 88, 78–79), Hirsch did not set out in *Cultural Literacy* to address *all* of the issues of concern in contemporary American education, and therefore inattention to the creative imagination should not be construed as a disregard for its nurture. In reply to the first possible objection, both references to analogy are concerned with its functional rather than its creative potential. Hirsch writes,

To explain the implications of their work to others, experts must be aware of the shared associations in our literate vocabulary and be able to build analogies on those associations. (108)

Indeed they must. It is a skill that enabled Fred Hoyle to explain the expanding universe by analogy to the baking of a raisin cake (ctd. in Levin 59). It is a skill that no teacher, whether in the sciences or in the humanities, should be without. But this is analogy on the functional—not the creative—level. In a later passage, Hirsch writes, in reference to transference in the development of language skills,

The human mind operates by analogy in many of its activities, and it generalizes from individual cases. (112)

Indeed it does. Who would deny that our ability to use inflections and to form sentences is an ability to construct analogies? But again, Hirsch is concerned with the functional, not with the creative.

In reply to the second possible objection, I do not infer that Hirsch is dismissing the development of the creative imagination. Rather, I argue that such development would be severely hampered by a curriculum that does not ensure common *experiences* as well as common information. It may not be necessary that all Americans read *Romeo and Juliet*, but “having *some* information about *Romeo and Juliet* (128)” is not a substitute for having experienced

it. It is not information that feeds the analogical imagination; it is images.

In *The Analogical Imagination*, a book focusing on theological discourse, David Tracy makes an observation applicable to discourse generally: that different modes of thought require different languages, both for conception and for expression. Tracy goes on to discuss “two major conceptual languages”: the analogical and the dialectical. The first of these is “a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity in difference”; the second is reflective, even “negating,” introducing a corrective to a vision that would otherwise be facile and naive. These languages are, of course, complementary, but it is the analogical language—experiential, symbolic, metaphorical, synthetic—that is the primary language of creative thought.

Is Hirsch’s two-part curriculum, shying away as it does from ensuring common literary experiences, conducive to the development of an analogical language and thus of the creative imagination? Just as the critical intelligence requires information, and just as critical thinking is developed through one critical intelligence interacting with other critical intelligences, so the creative imagination requires images, and creative thinking is developed by one analogical imagination interacting with other analogical imaginations.

That is why aspiring poets are advised to read other poets. Such interaction of analogical imaginations requires reservoirs of common experience, not only of real life, but also of literature and art. If we cannot make some reasonable assumptions about common cultural experiences, analogical discourse will be thwarted and the analogical imagination will be stunted. For an example, I need look no further than *Cultural Literacy* itself. Hirsch writes,

My father used to write business letters that alluded to Shakespeare. These allusions were effective for conveying complex messages to his associates, because, in his day, business people could make such allusions with every expectation of being understood. For instance, in my father’s commodity business, the timing of sales and purchases was all-important, and he would sometimes write or say to his colleagues, “There is a tide,” without further elaboration. Those four words carried not only a lot of complex information, but also the persuasive force of a proverb. In addition to the basic practical meaning,

“Act now!” what came across was a lot of implicit reasons why immediate action was important.

For some of my younger readers who may not recognize the allusion, the passage from *Julius Caesar* is:

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood leads on to
fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it
serves,
Or lose our ventures.

To say “There is a tide” is better than saying “Buy (or sell) now and you’ll cover expenses for the whole year, but if you fail to act right away, you may regret it the rest of your life.” That would be twenty-seven words instead of four, and while the bare message of the longer statement would be conveyed, the persuasive force wouldn’t.

If the audience of the elder Hirsch had had only *information* about *Julius Caesar*, “there is a tide” would have been unrecognizable. The elder Hirsch could write as he did because he shared with his audience certain literary experiences. Without such common *experiences*, analogical discourse is impossible. Things fall apart; there is no center to hold. The synthesizing power of the analogical imagination fades from the scene for want of a common language. If we want our young men and women to dream visions, we must enable them to speak and write a common analogical language.

III

“This is not a call for a lock-step curriculum; it is a call for American society to promote some similarity amid the diversity in literary studies.”

This is not a call for a lock-step curriculum; it is a call for American society to promote some similarity amid the diversity in literary studies. This is not a call for a conservative list of readings; such a list could and should include non-traditional readings, assuring that the experiences of women, African Americans, and other major groups are represented. This is not a call for some central authority that would force a common literary experience upon American students; it is a call for the formation of some central, non-governmental leadership body, broadly representative of American society, whose recommendations would be respected, to give direction to literary studies at all levels. If I may resort to an analogy, such a body would have no more authority over school curriculums than the *MLA Style Manual* has over journals, but it would be comparable in its influence.

I have not been so presumptuous as to draw up my own list of works that might constitute a common literary experience, for such a list must be founded on a broad-based consensus and under periodic review. I do have some ideas regarding criteria, but they would be the subject of another article.

The question of who should initiate such a project remains. Who is better suited than the academy to provide the non-coercive leadership required for such a challenge: to foster among a “people of paradox” (Kammen, *passim*) a pluralistic common culture.

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