In Cultural Literacy, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., addresses a problem that is real enough to be recognized by almost any teacher whose students are more than nine or ten years old. Contemporary Americans from sixth grade to graduate school don’t seem to know very much of the information that their teachers take for granted. It isn’t unusual today to ask a class of college students about to read *Pride and Prejudice* how many of them have ever heard of Jane Austen and find that fewer than half of them have. College teachers are stunned to realize that their students don’t know that the United States and the Soviet Union were allies—or at least fought on the same side—in World War II. If these teachers want to refer to the *Magnificat* or the Annunciation, they quickly find out that they had better explain these terms because they mean no more to an average college humanities class than the binomial theorem means to an average gathering of English professors.

Shocking as it is to stand before a class of college students and discover that most of them have never heard of Jane Austen, haven’t any idea of what you are talking about when you say that Bourges was the capital of the duchy of Berry, and don’t know if the Battle of Thermopylae is an event that happened before the Vietnam War or is actually an action fought in that war, for most classroom teachers who are also active scholars, it is even more shocking to realize that Hirsch’s proposal to right this situation has been taken seriously by so many people.

The people who concern them are not Hirsch’s popular audience but his large audience among professionals responsible for making educational policy, running school systems, and buying textbooks. Such
people feel a powerful attraction to any reform that promises to show by some “measurable and objective” test that things are improving. Hirsch points to a genuine phenomenon, says it’s a problem that must be solved because it is the cause of other, more serious, problems, and has a solution that will bring fast, fast, fast relief, as this scientific chart will demonstrate (Hirsch’s scientific chart is called the “Chall Curve”).

He has been successful enough with this audience to alarm a lot of classroom teachers. People who make educational policy, run school systems, and buy textbooks do not hide their annoyance when teachers tell them that their policies, directions, and textbooks are a menace to teaching and learning. Since the policy makers are unlikely to listen to them, the teachers try to find scholars and thinkers who are not part of the school system to argue their case.

That is how Wayne Booth, a literary scholar, like Hirsch, with a demonstrated interest in educational policy, found himself attempting to argue in a reasonable and almost excessively civil way that the reforms proposed in Cultural Literacy will treat symptoms only and end up causing new problems without solving any of the ones we have now (“Cultural Literacy”). Hirsch, invited to respond, dismissed what Booth had to say with all the impatience of a district superintendent and reaffirmed his commitment to “the cultural literacy project.” He declined to deal with Booth’s argument at all. To do so, he says, would be “easy but tedious” (23).

Wayne Booth’s objections to Hirsch’s proposals are addressed to teachers and make sense to teachers. Hirsch is a teacher too; that is why, I suppose, Booth wrote in the form of an open letter to him. But Hirsch, it seems to me, has chosen not to address teachers in his response; he is addressing policy makers instead. He tells them that the reason Booth’s objections seem so much harder to read than the original proposals is that while he himself is crisp and constructive, Booth, despite his reputation as a thinker, is “rambling and unconstructive” (22). The reason for this contrast, Hirsch claims, is that Booth is not engaged in thinking. He is, instead, speaking for a coalition of English teachers—an activity that evidently precludes thinking. Booth, according to Hirsch, is a politician representing notoriously recalcitrant obstructionists.

For Hirsch, Wayne Booth’s professional life has a sinister resemblance to the strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. There is Booth the thinker, who writes mentally harmonious literary criticism, and Booth the spokesman for a coalition of English teachers—who writes rambling and unconstructive essays full of “cognitive dissonances” (22). Hirsch,
in his eagerness to discredit dissent from his own project, argues *ad hominem* and, in doing so, creates a false division. This charge is not merely my pious opinion as Wayne Booth's onetime dissertation student and longtime friend. It will seem to be too evident to require argument for anybody willing to do a little intellectual history of the sort I did myself almost inadvertently.

In the summer of 1965, just after my first year of graduate study at the University of Chicago, I worked as a research assistant for two of my professors, Gwin J. Kolb and Wayne Booth, who were preparing an annotated bibliography of modern scholarship on English literature of the eighteenth century. The job occupied my mornings and left me free afternoons to poke around the half-deserted university. One day I wandered into a class in “Philosophy of Education” taught by Joseph J. Schwab, at that time a legendary Chicago teacher. The members of Schwab's class were, with the exception of one or two very senior classroom teachers, all professional administrators at precollegiate schools from around the country. I was twenty-two years old at the time and had never taught a class anywhere, but somehow talked Schwab into letting me attend on a regular basis. The course proved to be tremendously exciting. By asking a series of strategic questions—and refusing to accept inauthentic answers—Schwab forced us to read *The Republic* not for information but for concepts.

I had read *The Republic* in college but Schwab was getting me to read it in a way I hadn't before. He was also getting me to observe what I was doing as a reader. It brought sharply to mind what Wayne Booth had said one day to his class in “Forms of the Novel” the previous winter: “If you ever find yourself wondering why we are spending all this time examining these novels in such detail, I think we ought to stop and discuss it in class until we have a satisfactory answer, even if we don’t get through the list.” It is the only thing he said in that course that I still remember. He was the first teacher I had ever heard say such a thing. Where I went to college you read the books because they were on the list. Not getting through the list was regarded as a crime. The punishment was a low mark on the test—almost inevitable, since there were questions on the test about every book on the list. A low mark on the test could keep you out of graduate school and so on down an endless chain of artificial motives creating the conditions for reading as conditioned behavior instead of ethically informed action.

My work as a compiler of lists of modern scholarship on English literature of the eighteenth century slowed to a hot summer's crawl as
I spent more and more of my time in the education library consulting bound volumes of *The Journal of General Education*, to which Schwab had referred me. This journal, new to me that summer, had articles analyzing the same strategies and techniques that Schwab was following in his class. Some of those articles were by Schwab himself, others were by Wayne Booth.¹ They opened what was for me a new way of thinking about both reading and teaching, as a practice, an activity.

To divide Booth, then, as Hirsch does, into two qualitatively unequal parts, literary critic and spokesman for English teachers, defies what the evidence my summer’s research and the experience of the subsequent twenty-eight years have established. Booth has always been a spokesman for teachers, even at the outset of his career when he spoke only for himself. It is as wrong to attempt to separate Booth’s thought as a literary critic from his thinking about teaching as it would be to attempt to separate Samuel Johnson’s thought as a literary critic from his thinking about morality. For Booth, literary criticism is a refinement of a kind of reading that children begin to learn in the first grade; it isn’t another world.² Literary criticism as Booth has practiced it for all of his professional life is precisely speaking for a coalition of English teachers. The particular coalition he spoke for against Hirsch’s proposals taught at every level from primary grades through college, and one of their most pleasant discoveries when they met during the summer of 1987 was that English teachers at all levels can form a professional continuum and become a natural coalition.

This essay, then, is a response to Hirsch’s remarks. It is not addressed either to him or to his clients, the school administrators who are too interested in predictions, “findings,” “reform,” “progress,” and “success” to bother much about reason and argument. It is addressed instead to the ultimate policy makers in any society: the community of its citizens, and in the first instance to those members of that community who have the professional knowledge and experience to understand the damage that can be caused by reforms of the sort Hirsch is promoting and who have the public reputations to gain the attention of parents, whose perception of what is good for their children will slowly but ultimately prevail even over the educational bureaucracies.

In responding to Hirsch, it will be helpful to understand why he has made such a positive impression on so many professional administrators in the first place. This too requires a little history, for Hirsch has demonstrated that he is a skillful salesman working in a proven American tradition. In seeking to reform American education, he has
adopted the methods of another reformer, a military reformer of the 1950s and 1960s, who commanded the attention of policy makers and became one himself, Maxwell Taylor, "the intellectual general." Taylor's catch phrase was "flexible response." (As a phrase, it bears a structural resemblance to "cultural literacy.") Taylor placed his protégés in charge of the first great test of "flexible response" and assured the president and the secretary of defense that all the other generals who raised objections weren't worth listening to. They were just jealous that Taylor got a war and they didn't. I think Taylor would have admired the phrase "rambling and unconstructive." Taylor and his followers had "projections" and "findings" by the yard. He confidently predicted success and produced statistics that showed continuing progress through years of disaster. The great testing ground of "flexible response" was, of course, Vietnam.

I see considerable reason to fear that Hirsch may succeed in the same way that Taylor did. Like Taylor, he's got hold of an audience that thinks "something must be done to stop this," and, again like Taylor, he is a good salesman, especially when his audience has little direct experience with the situation that something must be done to stop.

Most administrators, like the teachers themselves, are shocked to discover that information they take for granted is simply unknown to the students for whom they are responsible. But unlike most teachers, the administrators feel public pressure directly and seek to cover themselves by adopting programs of reform to remedy the situation. If students have so little information, a program of reform that promises to supply the lack can be seen as just what is wanted. Of course, there is no end to information. Almost all of the English teachers who can't remember when they first heard of Jane Austen know who Michelangelo is, but most of them don't know who Rogier van der Weyden is and practically none of them can identify Philippe de Champaigne. It is impossible to explain why being able to identify Michelangelo in a trivial and superficial way is necessary to being culturally literate for someone who lives in Buffalo, New York, or American Fork, Utah, in the 1990s, but why being entirely ignorant of Rogier and Philippe is no disqualification. There is a tacit system that determines for any community what information can be taken for granted and what is esoterica. College teachers think they belong to what ought to be the cultural community of their students; most of their students disagree.

Hirsch and many others attach a great deal more importance than that, of course, to the phenomenon of students who don't know the in-
formation their teachers think they should. Hirsch himself thinks that ignorance of the sort teachers see in their students impedes these students' ability to learn. Being able to identify Michelangelo in a trivial and superficial way, taken together with thousands of other similar bits of information, is, Hirsch maintains, a necessary preliminary to literacy and learning. He calls this a "research finding" (23) as if it were something we ought to consider on the same level as, say, the "research finding" that oxygen is necessary to combustion.

Hirsch thinks the best solution to the educational problem he sees is to establish a set of universally required texts, but he concedes that this is unacceptable in the United States for cultural and political reasons. To meet the need without offending American sensibilities, then, he suggests that a list be compiled of all the bits of information people like himself take for granted and that this list be taught to students in the elementary grades.

Hirsch is, I think, disingenuous in his claims for what he proposes. "I predict that [the reforms proposed in Cultural Literacy] will result in a greater percentage of high school graduates who are qualified to go to college, and also a greater number of students who are able to do distinguished work after arriving there" (23).

The first part of this prediction will almost certainly prove accurate if we declare that mastery of a list like the one Hirsch composed is what will determine who is qualified to go to college. Most of the people who qualify now will, with little effort, be able to master the list and so will many others. It is like saying that many more people would qualify to be licensed as brain surgeons if we accepted as proof of qualification a candidate's ability to name every winner of the Nobel Prize in medicine in chronological order. Anyone who now qualifies to be a brain surgeon might see this requirement as a silly nuisance, but it's a safe bet that any brain surgeon can memorize the list and, of course, so can a lot of people who can't bone a chicken.

The second part of the prediction depends on what we define as distinguished work. Since there is a lot of disagreement right now about what qualifies as distinguished work—some colleges think deconstructive analyses of slasher videos can qualify as distinguished work—who knows what the situation will be after Hirsch's reforms are in place? The elite universities in this country may start giving people Ph.D.'s for dissertations that demonstrate why Aeneas Piccolomini should not be on the list but Howdy Doody should be, or why knowing that Hattie McDaniel won the Academy Award for best performance by an actress
in a supporting role in 1939 is a reliable index to a twelve year old's ability to do brain surgery when he's thirty. These might be thought of as research findings some day.

As things stand now, no competent college teacher with any sense stays shocked and immobile, waiting for reforms like Hirsch's to give her students who can identify Jane Austen and don't need to be told that Bourges was the capital of the duchy of Berry, because she knows something from her experience as a classroom teacher that many administrators do not. Once you have done what needs to be done to make one of Jane Austen's novels accessible to a group of students who never read a book that wasn't written in the twentieth century, never read a book that wasn't addressed to people like themselves in background and values, they will know who Jane Austen is. Once you've given people the concepts they need to look intelligently at the Cathedral of Saint-Etienne de Bourges or the Très riches heures de Jehan, duc de Berry, they will be able to identify Bourges—and they won't confuse it with Bruges or Burgos, either. To teach concepts effectively is, to be sure, much harder than to teach a list of information, and testing a student's conceptual range requires quite a lot of skill and ingenuity.

It takes a resourceful and knowledgeable person to evaluate learning if she tries to test it by asking, Why were such buildings as Saint-Etienne de Bourges built? Why were they thought to be worth the money and effort? What was their conceptual purpose? Does our own society do anything comparable? It is also time-consuming to evaluate the answers and teach students how to improve them. It is certainly easier to test information, and, of course, a machine can grade the answers. Machine grading will, in itself, have a certain appeal to the hacks, the incompetents, the indifferent, and the cynical. To teach anybody anything worth knowing requires, in general, actual knowledge about something the teacher believes is valuable, not as an inert lump and not as the coin that will get a student past a test, but valuable in action. The architects of the Vietnam War—both the policy makers in Washington and the commanding generals—knew all sorts of information and are just the kind of people who would have done swimmingly on any test based on Hirsch's list or anyone else's. The insights Wayne Booth fostered about the cognitive process and the ethical value of reading lead me to wish the policy makers and generals had left the directed intelligence reports to gather dust and instead had all read two books with conceptual comprehension: The Peloponnesian War and Pride and Prejudice. I don't believe that anyone who has read these two books and
learned the concepts required to understand them won't be equipped to make better decisions in any circumstances than someone who has not. (I am not proposing a sacred canon here; there are books in other cultures that will serve the same purpose; there are others in our own, but the two I have named have a fabulous track record.) I don't believe being able to identify Thucydides as the author of *The Peloponnesian War* with his dates and knowing that the book was written in Greek, or knowing that Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* and being able to give her dates and her father's profession and the names of all her brothers and sisters and throwing in Lady Catherine de Bourgh's daughter's governess's name to boot is good for doing anything except taking a test that gives arbitrary value to such information.\(^4\)

Jane Austen, who was neither a snob nor a fool, reminds us how useless such accomplishments are in any situation that actually requires some thinking. In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas Bertrand's daughters are struck at once by their cousin Fanny's cultural illiteracy in precisely Hirsch's sense.

Fanny could read, work, and write, but she had been taught nothing more; and as her cousins found her ignorant of many things with which they had been long familiar, they thought her prodigiously stupid, and for the first two or three weeks were continually bringing some fresh report of it into the drawing-room. "Dear Mamma, only think, my cousin cannot put the map of Europe together—or my cousin cannot tell the principal rivers in Russia—or she never heard of Asia Minor—or she does not know the difference between water-colours and crayons!—How strange!—Did you ever hear anything so stupid?"

..."I am sure I should have been ashamed of myself, if I had not known better long before I was so old as she is. I cannot remember the time when I did not know a great deal that she has not the least notion of yet. How long ago it is, aunt, since we used to repeat the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns!"

"Yes," added the other; "and of the Roman emperors as low as Severus; besides a great deal of the Heathen Mythology, and all the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers." (18–19)

People like Julia and Maria Bertrand, who find looking down on their neighbors an important source for preening and find that memorizing Hirsch's list gives them the objective and measurable proof of
superiority they crave, easily can be persuaded of the danger of Hirsch’s proposals. Implementing his reforms would only spoil their fun. Many others who think some sort of reform is called for could be persuaded in a couple of hours that the reforms Hirsch suggests are useless at best and potentially harmful at worst, since they will promote the docile and the timorous, bore the intelligent to death, and enrage the creative and original.

Although she hadn’t the benefit of the Chall Curve, Jane Austen valued reading greatly and was an excellent observer of what is and is not a necessary preliminary to literacy and learning. Being able to recite the list of Roman emperors as low as Severus, as well as all the Semi-Metals, proved of no use to Julia and Maria Bertrand when they were faced with having to make decisions. Neither did it prove to be a necessary preliminary to literacy and learning in Fanny Price’s case.

Kept back as she was by everybody else [Edmund’s] single support could not bring her forward, but his attentions were otherwise of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures. He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. . . . [H]e made reading useful by talking to her of what she read. . . . (22)

I suggest that the evidence of such culturally literate observers as Jane Austen should be taken with as much seriousness as the anonymous “research findings” to the contrary that Hirsch cites so briskly and confidently. Projects such as Hirsch’s are the curriculum of the Bertrands, are anything but new, and regularly have been dismissed by the seriously literate. Gustave Flaubert seemed to have devoted his spare time to compiling a massive dictionary of “cultural literacy” of his own to illustrate the mentality of such characters as the progressive pharmacist Homais in Madame Bovary. Flaubert called it the “Dictionary of Received Ideas.” Some of the entries are almost fit for the Dictionary of Cultural Literacy.

Archimedes  On hearing his name, say “Eureka!” Or else: “Give me a fulcrum and I will lift the world.” There is also Archimedes’ screw, but you aren’t expected to know what it is.5

Flaubert seems to illustrate the results of this sort of education in the conversations and actions of his most foolish characters. At their
first meeting Emma and Monsieur Léon repeat all the current clichés about nature, music, and literature. They have learned to parrot things of which they have no experiential knowledge. Emma knows all the sort of information that Fanny Price does not, yet she isn’t the reader that Fanny is. Her reading does nothing but lead her into disaster by allowing romantic fantasy to block conceptual maturity. She uses her knowledge of information and clichés to pass a test, a social test that persuades her that she is too good for the conditions in which she lives. That is what mastering detached bits of information leads to, the substitution of conditioned behavior for ethically informed action. It is a point Bernard Shaw takes up in *Pygmalion*.

Professor Higgins’s project in *Pygmalion* (perhaps even better known from Alan Jay Lerner’s adoption of it in *My Fair Lady*)—passing off a cockney flower girl as a “lady”—fails in its first test, Mrs. Higgins’s at home, because the surface of Eliza Doolittle’s speech, how it sounds, creates a dissonance with her concept of appropriate action. Hirsch wants to say that we become literate in the way Higgins wanted to make Eliza into a lady: from the outside in. It may be worth remembering here that Higgins’s project was simply to pass Eliza off as a lady, not to make her into a *real* one. Higgins despises the social values that create distinctions between flower girls and ladies and thinks they are based on silly and superficial marks. Given a test properly constrained to reveal only certain distinctions in dress and pronunciation, with the help of a cram course and an expense account, anyone endowed with a good ear can pass. Hirsch seems to think the distinction between the culturally literate and the culturally illiterate is a similarly silly one. His project reduces cultural literacy to a mastery of information as a necessary foundation to more complex skills. He can, if he is allowed to control how literacy is tested, pass off almost anyone who can be charmed or threatened into learning a list of information (Higgins’s two methods with Eliza) as literate. His project will never be able to make them actually so.

Higgins’s project—and Hirsch’s too—is at best irrelevant to education for self-directed activity. In both cases, what is learned is directed to a test. Can Eliza succeed in fooling people into thinking she is a lady? Can a sixth grader in Cincinnati, who has never seen a single painting or sculpture by anybody, identify Michelangelo on a test? Why would they want to? Eliza merely wanted to speak proper English so she could get a job in a shop; she didn’t want to pass herself off as what she wasn’t. That was Higgins’s project. The sixth grader will be put into the position of sixteenth-century gentlemen’s sons, who were forced to learn Latin without understanding why. The reason was not
intellectual, but merely social. Conventionally, gentlemen had to show some knowledge of Latin to separate themselves from lower orders who hadn’t the money to hire Latin masters. Almost everyone who was really culturally literate, from Montaigne to Erasmus to John Locke, deplored both the practice and the inevitable means of its achievement.6

The archetype of the sort of test Hirsch proposes, analytically if not historically, is the Turing Test, in which, given a certain protocol, a machine when questioned gives answers indistinguishable from those given by a human being and so must be regarded as thinking in the same sense that a human being thinks. For Turing himself, there is no distinction between machines and human beings. If a machine’s answers to the questions put to it are indistinguishable from a human being’s answers to the same questions, then machines must be regarded as being able to think. It isn’t that people are reduced to machines by the Turing Test, since Turing began by thinking that human beings are machines who process bits of information; it is just a question of duplicating the ability to process information without all the unnecessary trappings of being human.7

The model is a monstrosity and is always rejected by children because children, unlike Turing and Hirsch and sixteenth-century Latin masters, have never accepted the thesis that thinking is processing bits of information. Learning a list of information does not advance a child’s ability to read; it is a cheap substitute for the difficult work of satisfying a child’s naturally growing desire to read for concepts instead of information. Persuading children that learning is directed exclusively or even primarily toward a test discourages their desire to learn. Early in their education, children hope that the learning they acquire through reading will be directed toward their lives, their choices, their decisions, the way they perceive the world around them. When elementary school reading books present bland characters who never have conflicts or problems, never get frustrated, never raise their voices, never feel like strangling one another, children lose interest because these books teach them that reading has nothing to do with the world they live in; it’s just another meaningless school task like long division, which no adult, once out of school, is ever seen doing.8 When a reader is mature enough to read for concepts, and is about to begin Pride and Prejudice or The Peloponnesian War, that reader can learn all the necessary information very quickly, even if he is not carrying around dictionary-like bits of information about Austen, Jane (1775–1817) or Culture, Ancient Greek.

I would like to end with a “research finding” of my own. This find-
ing does not require much labor to establish, and the reader can test it by a brief self-examination. It does not require the ability to interpret the Thomas Projection or the Booth Curve (English teachers are easily intimidated by anything that sounds even vaguely like mathematics). It doesn’t offer fast relief, just a warning against trying to substitute skillfully promoted fads for the difficult but necessary effort to achieve the most fundamental goal of general education: the ability to read for concepts instead of information.

My finding is the same as Jane Austen’s, that knowing lists of information is not a necessary preliminary to literacy and learning. Here is how to test it experimentally. There are fifty-nine items in this essay that might go into a “cultural dictionary.” They are

- American Fork, Utah
- Analysis, Deconstructive
- Annunciation
- Argument *ad hominem*
- At home
- Austen, Jane
- Award, Academy
- Berry, duchy of
- Bertrand, Julia
- Bertrand, Maria
- Bertrand, Sir Thomas
- Binomial theorem
- Bourges
- Bourgh, Lady Catherine de
- Bovary, Emma
- Bruges
- Buffalo, New York
- Burgos
- Chall Curve
- Champaigne, Philippe de
- Cincinnati
- Doody, Howdy
- Doolittle, Eliza
- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, *The Strange Case of*
- Erasmus
- Flaubert, Gustave
- Flexible Response, strategic doctrine of
- Higgins, Mrs.
- Higgins, Professor Henry
- Homais
- Johnson, Samuel
- Léon
- Lerner, Alan Jay
- Locke, John
- Madame Bovary
- Magnificat
- Mansfield Park
- McDaniel, Hattie
- Michelangelo Buonarroti
- Montaigne, Michel Eyquem, seigneur de
- My Fair Lady
- Nobel Prize for medicine
- *Peloponnesian War, The*
- Piccolomini, Aeneas
- Price, Fanny
- Pride and Prejudice
- Pygmalion
- Republic, The
- Slasher videos
- Soviet Union
- Taylor, Maxwell
Now ask yourself a few questions. Could you identify all of these items before you started reading my essay? Did the fact that you did not know, let us say, that Bourges was the capital of the old duchy of Berry impede your ability to read this essay or to learn something—perhaps why I think Hirsch’s project is silly?

I assume Hirsch would concede that I am culturally literate and so is anybody who has read my essay to this point. It must be clear to my readers that I have a fondness for information of a broadly cultural kind and have collected quite a lot of it from a variety of domains, some of them not usually thought to be at all closely related. Familiar and casual reference to Alan Turing and Hattie McDaniel, Maxwell Taylor and Rogier van der Weyden suggests that I have taken an unusual itinerary across the cultural terrain. Like anyone’s range of reference, mine is the by-product of a particular set of activities and interests. I did not sit down and learn to pass a test on what I can now articulate as a list of allusions and references drawn from this essay. Knowing this list did not lead me to write this essay, nor is it a necessary preliminary to such writing. Someone who had learned my fifty-nine-item list as detached bits of information would not, as a result, be able to write an essay like this one. Moreover, I suspect that few of my readers happen to be masters of precisely this list. I don’t expect that everyone who reads this essay started off knowing that Bourges was the capital of the old duchy of Berry. Some probably still have no precise idea what or where the duchy of Berry was. For most of my readers, I suppose the binomial theorem could have an entry like Flaubert’s on Archimedes’ screw: “It exists, but you aren’t expected to know what it is.” Aeneas Piccolomini makes fine reading, is a fascinating person, and is the only known writer of pornographic romances to have been elected pope, but I don’t expect that very many readers of this essay recognized his name or could have identified him. Did this ignorance of detached bits of information—however delicious in themselves—stop you from reading this essay and understanding my ideas?

Hirsch seems to suggest that it should have, and has made a great impression on administrators and an even greater one on bureaucrats. In The Vocation of a Teacher, Wayne Booth describes an encounter with
one of them, Chester Finn, from the federal Department of Education, speaking to the sixty teachers for whom Booth later spoke in his open letter to Hirsch. Like the good teacher I have always known him to be, Booth is not a talking head offering facile solutions to problems that every generation must solve anew. Booth’s analysis of Finn’s effect on the teachers shows no more evidence of cognitive dissonance than the best pages of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* or *The Company We Keep*. I end this chapter by quoting Wayne Booth, critic-as-spokesman-for-teachers, doing what the best teachers have always done, framing good questions that lead their readers to activities and practice, not to the possession of dead information.

When [Chester Finn] told us that we should either buy Hirsch’s list of about 5,000 terms, “what every American needs to know” (or as the new jacket has it, “The Thinking American’s List”) or come up with a list of our own, he set the agenda for the conference in ways he could never have dreamed of. We now know that our task is to combat his way of working; we must try to think about how to educate. How are we to confront ourselves as we now are—a vast, complex, disorganized group of men and women with a vocation for “English teaching” but without a central, articulated notion of what that vocation requires of us and of our various publics? How can we turn our fellow citizens, who in some sense believe deeply in the importance of “English,” into a nation of learners: a learning culture rather than an *information-processing* culture? (267)

Anyone can understand the problems facing “the profession of English” by reading passages such as this one, even if she doesn’t know that Wayne Booth was born in American Fork, Utah, and even if she never heard of *The Journal of General Education*. Reading Wayne Booth might also serve some readers as a source for a concept of criticism—one that is sophisticated enough to deepen our understanding of writers as great as Jane Austen and Gustave Flaubert while remaining securely part of the common activity of reading, an activity that extends from the first grade to graduate school. Wayne Booth’s practice consistently implies that literary criticism is no more than a nuance added to the immensely more complex cognitive phenomenon of reading, and subsequently that the activity of literary criticism always speaks for a coalition of English teachers. For Wayne Booth, the practice of criticism is the vocation of a teacher, and that is, I suggest, the best and most fundamental reason to celebrate his career.
Notes


2. When Wayne Booth read this essay in draft, he told me, on coming to this sentence, that he once visited his son's fourth-grade class and discussed with these young readers a story they had recently read. "I used the same principles I wrote about in The Rhetoric of Fiction," he said, "Who are the bad guys, and how do you know?" I had never heard this anecdote before, but was glad to have such an authoritative confirmation of my description of Booth as a critic. It stimulated a fantasy: Hillis Miller visits a class of fourth graders. Could he use his normal critical principles in discussing a story with them, aporia and the uncanny moment? Miller may be more sophisticated than Booth, but, to my mind, losing touch altogether with fourth graders, when it comes to reading stories, is to achieve the sophistication of the sophists.


Bibliography


II

Ethics and Fictions