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The deeds were monstrous, but the doer [Adolf Eichmann]....was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial...was something entirely negative; it was not stupidity but thoughtlessness.... Might not the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty for thought

– Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

The School Edition

I always knew schoolbooks and real books were different. Most kids do. But I remained vague on any particular grounds for my prejudice until one day, tired of the simple-minded junior high school English curriculum, I decided to teach *Moby Dick* to eighth-grade classes. A friendly assistant principal smuggled a school edition into the book purchases and we were able to weigh anchor the next fall.

What a book! Ishmael, the young seaman who relates Melville's tale, is a half-orphan by decree of Fate, sentenced never to know a natural home again. But Ahab is no accidental victim. He has consciously willed his own exile from a young wife and child, from the fruits of his wealth, and from Earth itself in order to pursue his vocation of getting even. Revenge on the natural order is what drives him.

War against God and family. To me, it defines the essence of Americanness. It's no accident that America's three

classic novels—*Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Huckleberry Finn*—each deal with ambiguous families or that each emerges from a time not far from either side of the Civil War. America had been an inferno for families, as Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain all knew. Midway through our first full century as a nation, the nearly universal American experience of homelessness found its voice. Ishmael is a half-orphan, Ahab an absentee father and husband, the harpooners expatriate men of color; Pearl a bastard, Hester an adulteress, the Reverend Dimmesdale a sexual predator and runaway father; Huck Finn, de facto, an adoptee, Jim a twice-uprooted African slave. When we think what our schools became we need to recall what a great pile of us are homeless. We long for homes we can never have as long as we have institutions like school, television, corporation, and government *in loco parentis*.

Patricia Lines of the U.S. Department of Education, in trying honorably to discuss what the rank and file of homeschoolers actually do, finally declared it seems to be wrapped up closely with a feeling of "intense interest in the life of the community." Above anything else, she found *loyalty* in the warp and woof of family:

Homeschoolers are tremendously *loyal* as family members, they are suspicious of television and other less intimate influences. They eat as a family, they socialize as a family, they attend church as a family, they become members of an extended...homeschooling community.

American great fiction is about individuals broken from family. The closest they come to satisfying the universal yearning is a struggle for surrogates—like the strange connection between Pearl, Hester, and the dark forest. America's most fascinating storytellers focus on the hollowness of American public life. We have no place to go when work is done. Our inner life long extinguished, our public work in remaking the world can never be done because personal *homework* isn't available to us. There's no institutional solace for this malady. In outrage at our lonely fate, we lay siege to the family sanctuary wherever it survives, as Ahab lay siege to the seas for his accursed Whale.

For this and other reasons long lost, I decided to teach *Moby Dick* to my eighth-grade classes. Including the dumb ones. I discovered right away the white whale was just too big for forty-five-minute bell breaks; I couldn't divide it comfortably to fit the schedule. Melville's book is too vast to say just what the right way to teach it really is. It speaks to every reader privately. To grapple with it demanded elastic time, not the fixed bell breaks of junior high. Indeed, it offered so many choices of purpose—some aesthetic, some historical, some social, some philosophical, some theological, some dramatic, some economic—that compelling the attention of a room full of young people to any one aspect seemed willful and arbitrary.

Soon after I began teaching *Moby Dick* I realized the school edition wasn't a real book but a kind of disguised indoctrination providing all the questions, a scientific addition to the original text designed to make the book teacher-proof and student-proof. If you even read those questions (let alone answered them) there would be no chance ever again for a private exchange between you and Melville; the invisible editor would have preempted it.

The editors of the school edition provided a package of prefabricated questions and more than a hundred chapter-by-chapter abstracts and interpretations of their own. Many teachers consider this a gift—it does the thinking for them. If I didn't assign these questions, kids wanted to know why not. Their parents wanted to know why not. Unless everyone duly parroted the party line set down by the book editor, children used to getting high marks became scared and angry.

The school text of *Moby Dick* had been subtly denatured; worse than useless, it was actually dangerous. So I pitched it out and bought a set of undoctored books with my own money. The school edition of *Moby Dick* asked all the right questions, so I had to throw it away. Real books don't do that. Real books demand people actively participate by asking their own questions. Books that show you the best questions to ask aren't just stupid, they hurt the mind under the guise of helping it—exactly the way standardized tests do. Real books, unlike schoolbooks, can't be standardized. They are eccentric; no book fits everyone.

If you think about it, schooled people, like schoolbooks, are much alike. Some folks find that desirable for economic reasons. The discipline organizing our economy and our politics derives from mathematical and

interpretive exercises, the accuracy of which depends upon customers being much alike and very predictable. People who read too many books get quirky. We can't have too much eccentricity or it would bankrupt us. Market research depends on people behaving *as if* they were alike. It doesn't really matter whether they *are* or not.

One way to see the difference between schoolbooks and real books like *Moby Dick* is to examine different procedures which separate librarians, the custodians of real books, from schoolteachers, the custodians of schoolbooks. To begin with, libraries are usually comfortable, clean, and quiet. They are orderly places where you can actually read instead of just pretending to read.

For some reason libraries are never age-segregated, nor do they presume to segregate readers by questionable tests of ability any more than farms or forests or oceans do. The librarian doesn't tell me what to read, doesn't tell me what sequence of reading I have to follow, doesn't grade my reading. The librarian trusts me to have a worthwhile purpose of my own. I appreciate that and trust the library in return.

Some other significant differences between libraries and schools: the librarian lets me ask my own questions and helps me when I want help, not when she decides I need it. If I feel like reading all day long, that's okay with the librarian, who doesn't compel me to stop at intervals by ringing a bell in my ear. The library keeps its nose out of my home. It doesn't send letters to my family, nor does it issue orders on how I should use my reading time at home.

The library doesn't play favorites; it's a democratic place as seems proper in a democracy. If the books I want are available, I get them, even if that decision deprives someone more gifted and talented than I am. The library never humiliates me by posting ranked lists of good readers. It presumes good reading is its own reward and doesn't need to be held up as an object lesson to bad readers. One of the strangest differences between a library and a school is that you almost never see a kid behaving badly in a library.

The library never makes predictions about my future based on my past reading habits. It tolerates eccentric reading because it realizes free men and women are often very eccentric. Finally, the library has real books, not schoolbooks. I know the *Moby Dick* I find in the library won't have questions at the end of the chapter or be scientifically bowdlerized. Library books are not written by collective pens. At least not yet.

Real books conform to the private curriculum of each author, not to the invisible curriculum of a corporate bureaucracy. Real books transport us to an inner realm of solitude and unmonitored mental reflection in a way schoolbooks and computer programs can't. If they were not devoid of such capacity, they would jeopardize school routines devised to control behavior. Real books conform to the private curriculum of particular authors, not to the demands of bureaucracy.

Intellectual Espionage

At the start of WWII millions of men showed up at registration offices to take low-level academic tests before being inducted.¹ The years of maximum mobilization were 1942 to 1944; the fighting force had been mostly schooled in the 1930s, both those inducted and those turned away. Of the 18 million men were tested, 17,280,000 of them were judged to have the minimum competence in reading required to be a soldier, a 96 percent literacy rate. Although this was a 2 percent fall-off from the 98 percent rate among *voluntary* military applicants ten years earlier, the dip was so small it didn't worry anybody.

WWII was over in 1945. Six years later another war began in Korea. Several million men were tested for military service but this time 600,000 were rejected. Literacy in the draft pool had dropped to 81 percent, even though all that was needed to classify a soldier as literate was fourth- grade reading proficiency. In the few short years from the beginning of WWII to Korea, a terrifying problem of adult illiteracy had appeared. The Korean War group

received most of its schooling in the 1940s, and it had more years in school with more professionally trained personnel and more scientifically selected textbooks than the WWII men, yet it could not read, write, count, speak, or think as well as the earlier, less-schooled contingent.

A third American war began in the mid-1960s. By its end in 1973 the number of men found noninductible by reason of inability to read safety instructions, interpret road signs, decipher orders, and so on—in other words, the number found illiterate—had reached 27 percent of the total pool. Vietnam-era young men had been schooled in the 1950s and the 1960s—much better schooled than either of the two earlier groups—but the 4 percent illiteracy of 1941 which had transmuted into the 19 percent illiteracy of 1952 had now had grown into the 27 percent illiteracy of 1970. Not only had the fraction of competent readers dropped to 73 percent but a substantial chunk of even those were only barely adequate; they could not keep abreast of developments by reading a newspaper, they could not read for pleasure, they could not sustain a thought or an argument, they could not write well enough to manage their own affairs without assistance.

Consider how much more compelling this steady progression of intellectual blindness is when we track it through army admissions tests rather than college admissions scores and standardized reading tests, which inflate apparent proficiency by frequently changing the way the tests are scored.

Looking back, abundant data exist from states like Connecticut and Massachusetts to show that by 1840 the incidence of complex literacy in the United States was between 93 and 100 percent wherever such a thing mattered. According to the Connecticut census of 1840, only one citizen out of every 579 was illiterate and you probably don't want to know, not really, what people in those days considered literate; it's too embarrassing. Popular novels of the period give a clue: *Last of the Mohicans*, published in 1826, sold so well that a contemporary equivalent would have to move 10 million copies to match it. If you pick up an uncut version you find yourself in a dense thicket of philosophy, history, culture, manners, politics, geography, analysis of human motives and actions, all conveyed in data-rich periodic sentences so formidable only a determined and well-educated reader can handle it nowadays. Yet in 1818 we were a small-farm nation without colleges or universities to speak of. Could those simple folk have had more complex minds than our own?

By 1940, the literacy figure for all states stood at 96 percent for whites, 80 percent for blacks. Notice that for all the disadvantages blacks labored under, four of five were nevertheless literate. Six decades later, at the end of the twentieth century, the National Adult Literacy Survey and the National Assessment of Educational Progress say 40 percent of blacks and 17 percent of whites can't read at all. Put another way, black illiteracy doubled, white illiteracy quadrupled. Before you think of anything else in regard to these numbers, think of this: we spend three to four times as much real money on schooling as we did sixty years ago, but sixty years ago virtually everyone, black or white, could read.

In their famous bestseller, *The Bell Curve*, prominent social analysts Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein say that what we're seeing are the results of selective breeding in society. Smart people naturally get together with smart people, dumb people with dumb people. As they have children generation after generation, the differences between the groups gets larger and larger. That sounds plausible and the authors produce impressive mathematics to prove their case, but their documentation shows they are entirely ignorant of the military data available to challenge their contention. The terrifying drop in literacy between World War II and Korea happened in a decade, and even the brashiest survival-of-the-fittest theorist wouldn't argue evolution unfolds that way. *The Bell Curve* writers say black illiteracy (and violence) is genetically programmed, but like many academics they ignore contradictory evidence.

For example, on the matter of violence inscribed in black genes, the inconvenient parallel is to South Africa where 31 million blacks live, the same count living in the United States. Compare numbers of blacks who died by violence in South Africa in civil war conditions during 1989, 1990, and 1991 with our own peacetime mortality statistics and you find that far from exceeding the violent death toll in the United States or even matching it, South Africa had proportionately less than one-quarter the violent death rate of American blacks. If more contemporary comparisons are sought, we need only compare the current black literacy rate in the United States (56 percent)

with the rate in Jamaica (98.5 percent)—a figure considerably higher than the American white literacy rate (83 percent).

If not heredity, what then? Well, one change is indisputable, well-documented and easy to track. During WWII, American public schools massively converted to non-phonetic ways of teaching reading. On the matter of violence alone this would seem to have impact: according to the Justice Department, 80 percent of the incarcerated *violent* criminal population is illiterate or nearly so (and 67 percent of all criminals locked up). There seems to be a direct connection between the humiliation poor readers experience and the life of angry criminals.²

As reading ability plummeted in America after WWII, crime soared, so did out-of-wedlock births, which doubled in the 1950s and doubled again in the '60s, when bizarre violence for the first time became commonplace in daily life.

When literacy was first abandoned as a primary goal by schools, white people were in a better position than black people because they inherited a three-hundred-year-old American tradition of learning to read at home by matching spoken sound with letters, thus home assistance was able to correct the deficiencies of dumbed-down schools for whites. But black people had been forbidden to learn to read under slavery, and as late as 1930 only averaged three to four years of schooling, so they were helpless when teachers suddenly stopped teaching children to read, since they had no fall-back position. Not helpless because of genetic inferiority but because they had to trust school authorities to a much greater extent than white people.

Back in 1952 the Army quietly began hiring hundreds of psychologists to find out how 600,000 high school graduates had successfully faked illiteracy. Regna Wood sums up the episode this way:

After the psychologists told the officers that the graduates weren't faking, Defense Department administrators knew that something terrible had happened in grade school reading instruction. And they knew it had started in the thirties. Why they remained silent, no one knows. The switch back to reading instruction that worked for everyone should have been made then. But it wasn't.

In 1882, fifth graders read these authors in their *Appleton School Reader*: William Shakespeare, Henry Thoreau, George Washington, Sir Walter Scott, Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Bunyan, Daniel Webster, Samuel Johnson, Lewis Carroll, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others like them. In 1995, a student teacher of fifth graders in Minneapolis wrote to the local newspaper, "I was told children are not to be expected to spell the following words correctly: back, big, call, came, can, day, did, dog, down, get, good, have, he, home, if, in, is, it, like, little, man, morning, mother, my, night, off, out, over, people, play, ran, said, saw, she, some, soon, their, them, there, time, two, too, up, us, very, water, we, went, where, when, will, would, etc. Is this nuts?"

¹The discussion here is based on Regna Lee Wood's work as printed in Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch's *Network News and Views* (and reprinted many other places). Together with other statistical indictments, from the National Adult Literacy Survey, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and a host of other credible sources, it provides chilling evidence of the disastrous turn in reading methodology. But in a larger sense the author urges every reader to trust personal judgment over "numerical" evidence, whatever the source. During the writer's 30-year classroom experience, the decline in student ability to comprehend difficult text was marked, while the ability to extract and parrot "information" in the form of "facts" was much less affected. This is a product of deliberate pedagogy, to what end is the burden of my essay.

²A particularly clear example of the dynamics hypothesized to cause the correlation can be found in Michael S. Brunner's monograph, "Reduced Recidivism and Increased Employment Opportunity Through Research-Based Reading Instruction," United States Department of Justice (June 1992). Brunner's recent book *Retarding America*, written as a Visiting Fellow for the U.S. Department of Justice, is recommended. A growing body of documentation ties illiteracy causally to violent crime. A study by Dennis Hogenson titled "Reading Failure and Juvenile Delinquency" (Reading Reform Foundation) attempted to correlate teenage aggression with age, family size, number of parents present in home, rural versus urban environment, socio-economic status, minority group membership, and religious preference. None of these factors produced a significant correlation. But one did. As the author reports, "Only reading failure was found to correlate with aggression in both populations of delinquent boys." An organization of ex-prisoners testified before the Sub-Committee on Education of the U.S. Congress that in its opinion illiteracy was an important causative factor in crime "for the illiterate have very few honest ways to make a living." In 1994 the U.S.

Department of Education acknowledged that two-thirds of all incarcerated criminals have poor literacy.

Looking Behind Appearances

Do you think class size, teacher compensation, and school revenue have much to do with education quality? If so, the conclusion is inescapable that we are living in a golden age. From 1955 to 1991 the U.S. pupil/teacher ratio dropped 40 percent, the average salary of teachers rose 50 percent (in real terms) and the annual expense per pupil, inflation adjusted, soared 350 percent. What other hypothesis, then, might fit the strange data I'm about to present?

Forget the 10 percent drop in SAT and Achievement Test scores the press beats to death with regularity; how do you explain the 37 percent decline since 1972 in students who score above 600 on the SAT? *This is an absolute decline, not a relative one.* It is not affected by an increase in unsuitable minds taking the test or by an increase in the numbers. The absolute body count of smart students is down drastically with a test not more difficult than yesterday's but considerably less so.

What should be made of a 50 percent decline among the most rarefied group of test-takers, those who score above 750? In 1972, there were 2,817 American students who reached this pinnacle; only 1,438 did in 1994—*when kids took a much easier test.* Can a 50 percent decline occur in twenty-two years without signaling that some massive leveling in the public school mind is underway?¹

In a real sense where your own child is concerned you might best forget scores on these tests entirely as a reliable measure of what they purport to assess. I wouldn't deny that *mass* movements in these scores in one direction or another indicate *something* is going on, and since the correlation between success in *schooling* and success on these tests is close, then significant score shifts are certainly measuring changes in understanding. This is a difficult matter for anyone to sort out, since many desirable occupational categories (and desirable university seats even before that) are reserved for those who score well. The resultant linkage of adult income with test scores then creates the illusion these tests are separating cream from milk, but the results are rigged in advance by foreclosing opportunity to those screened out by the test! In a humble illustration, if you only let students with high scores on the language component of the SATs cut hair, eventually it would appear that verbal facility and grooming of tresses had some vital link with each other. Between 1960 and 1998 the nonteaching bureaucracy of public schools grew 500 percent, but oversight was concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. The 40,520 school districts with elected boards this nation had in 1960 shriveled to 15,000 by 1998.

On the college rung of the school ladder something queer was occurring, too. Between 1960 and 1984 the quality of undergraduate education at America's fifty best-known colleges and universities altered substantially. According to a 1996 report by the National Association of Scholars, these schools stopped providing "broad and rigorous exposure to major areas of knowledge" for the average student, even at decidedly un-average universities like Yale and Stanford.

In 1964, more than half of these institutions required a thesis or comprehensive for the bachelor's degree; by 1993, 12 percent did; over the same period, the average number of classroom days fell 16 percent, and requirements in math, natural science, philosophy, literature, composition, and history almost vanished. Rhetoric, most potent of the active literacies, *completely* vanished, and a foreign language, once required at 96 percent of the great colleges, fell to 64 percent.

According to *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (December 1995), 33 percent of all patients cannot read and understand instructions on how often to take medication, notices about doctor's appointments, consent forms, labels on prescription bottles, insurance forms, and other simple parts of self-care. They are rendered helpless by inability to read. Concerning those behind the nation's prison walls (a population that has tripled since 1980), the National Center for Education Statistics stated in a 1996 report that 80 percent of all prisoners could not interpret a bus schedule, understand a news article or warranty instructions, or read maps,

schedules, or payroll forms. Nor could they balance a checkbook. Forty percent could not calculate the cost of a purchase.

Once upon a time we were a new nation that allowed ordinary citizens to learn how to read well and encouraged them to read anything they thought would be useful. Close reading of tough-minded writing is still the best, cheapest, and quickest method known for learning to think for yourself. This invitation to commoners extended by America was the most revolutionary pedagogy of all.

Reading, and rigorous discussion of that reading in a way that obliges you to formulate a position and support it against objections, is an operational definition of education in its most fundamental civilized sense. No one can do this very well without learning ways of paying attention: from a knowledge of diction and syntax, figures of speech, etymology, and so on, to a sharp ability to separate the primary from the subordinate, understand allusion, master a range of modes of presentation, test truth, and penetrate beyond the obvious to the profound messages of text. Reading, analysis, and discussion are the way we develop reliable judgment, the principal way we come to penetrate covert movements behind the facade of public appearances. Without the ability to read and argue we're just geese to be plucked.

Just as experience is necessary to understand abstraction, so the reverse is true. Experience can only be mastered by extracting general principles out of the mass of details. In the absence of a perfect universal mentor, books and other texts are the best and cheapest stand-ins, always available to those who know where to look. Watching details of an assembly line or a local election unfold isn't very educational unless you have been led in careful ways to analyze the experience. Reading is the skeleton key for all who lack a personal tutor of quality.²

Reading teaches nothing more important than the state of mind in which you find yourself *absolutely alone* with the thoughts of another mind, a matchless form of intimate rapport available only to those with the ability to block out distraction and concentrate. Hence the urgency of reading *well* if you read for power.

Once you trust yourself to go mind-to-mind with great intellects, artists, scientists, warriors, and philosophers, you are finally free. In America, before we had forced schooling, an astonishing range of unlikely people knew reading was like Samson's locks—something that could help make them formidable, that could teach them their rights and how to defend those rights, could lead them toward self-determination, free from intimidation by experts. These same unlikely people knew that the power bestowed through reading could give them insight into the ways of the human heart, so they would not be cheated or fooled so easily, and that it could provide an inexhaustible store of useful knowledge—advice on how to do just about anything.

By 1812, Pierre DuPont was claiming that barely four in a thousand Americans were unable to read well and that the young had skill in argumentation thanks to daily debates at the common breakfast table. By 1820, there was even more evidence of Americans' avid reading habits, when 5 million copies of James Fenimore Cooper's complex and allusive novels were sold, along with an equal number of Noah Webster's didactic *Speller*—to a population of dirt farmers under 20 million in size.

In 1835, Richard Cobden announced there was six times as much newspaper reading in the United States as in England, and the census figures of 1840 gave fairly exact evidence that a sensational reading revolution had taken place without any exhortation on the part of public moralists and social workers, but because common people had the initiative and freedom to learn. In North Carolina, the worst situation of any state surveyed, eight out of nine could still read and write.

In 1853, Per Siljestromm, a Swedish visitor, wrote, "In no country in the world is the taste for reading so diffuse as among the common people in America." The *American Almanac* observed grandly, "Periodical publications, especially newspapers, disseminate knowledge throughout all classes of society and exert an amazing influence in forming and giving effect to public opinion." It noted the existence of over a thousand newspapers. In this nation of common readers, the spiritual longings of ordinary people shaped the public discourse. Ordinary people who could read, though not privileged by wealth, power, or position, could see through the fraud of social class or the even

grander fraud of official expertise. That was the trouble.

In his book *The New Illiterates*, author Sam Blumenfeld gives us the best introduction to what went wrong with reading in the United States. He also gives us insight into why learning to read needn't be frustrating or futile. A typical letter from one of his readers boasts of her success in imparting the alphabet code to four children under the age of five by the simple method of practice with letter sounds. One day she found her three-year-old working his way through a lesson alone at the kitchen table, reading S-am, Sam, m-an, man, and so on. Her verdict on the process: "I had just taught him his letter sounds. He picked [the rest] up and did it himself. That's how simple it is."

1The critics of schooling who concentrate on fluctuations in standardized test scores to ground their case against the institution are committing a gross strategic mistake for several reasons, the most obvious of which is that in doing so they must first implicitly acknowledge the accuracy of such instruments in ranking every member of the youth population against every other member, hence the justice of using such measures to allocate privileges and rewards. An even larger folly occurs because the implicit validation of these tests by the attention of school critics cedes the entire terrain of scientific pedagogy, armoring it against strong counter-measures by recruiting the opposition, in effect, to support teaching to the test. The final folly lies in the ease with which these measures can be rigged to produce whatever public effects are wanted.

2In a fascinating current illustration of the power of books, black female tennis star Venus Williams' father acknowledged in a press interview for the *Toronto Globe* that he had, indeed, set out to create a tennis millionaire from his infant daughter even before her birth. Mr. Williams, who had no knowledge whatsoever of the game of tennis, and who was reared in a poor home in the South by his single mother, had his ambition piqued by witnessing a young woman on television receiving a \$48,000 check for playing tennis successfully. At that moment he proposed to his wife that they set out to make their unborn children tennis millionaires. How did he learn the game? By reading books, he says, and renting videos. That, and common sense discipline, was all that Venus and sister Serena needed to become millionaire teenagers.

The Sudbury Valley School

I know a school for kids ages three to eighteen that doesn't teach anybody to read, yet everyone who goes there learns to do it, most very well. It's the beautiful Sudbury Valley School, twenty miles west of Boston in the old Nathaniel Bowditch "cottage" (which looks suspiciously like a mansion), a place ringed by handsome outbuildings, a private lake, woods, and acres of magnificent grounds. Sudbury is a private school, but with a tuition under \$4,000 a year it's considerably cheaper than a seat in a New York City public school. At Sudbury kids teach themselves to read; they learn at many different ages, even into the teen years (though that's rare). When each kid is ready he or she self-instructs, if such a formal label isn't inappropriate for such a natural undertaking. During this time they are free to request as much adult assistance as needed. That usually isn't much.

In thirty years of operation, Sudbury has never had a single kid who didn't learn to read. All this is aided by a magnificent school library on open shelves where books are borrowed and returned on the honor system. About 65 percent of Sudbury kids go on to good colleges. The place has never seen a case of dyslexia. (That's not to say some kids don't reverse letters and such from time to time, but such conditions are temporary and self-correcting unless institutionalized into a disease.) So Sudbury doesn't even teach reading yet all its kids learn to read and even like reading. What could be going on there that we don't understand?

Bootie Zimmer

The miracle woman who taught me to read was my mother, Bootie. Bootie never got a college degree, but nobody despaired about that because daily life went right along then without too many college graduates. Here was Bootie's scientific method: she would hold me on her lap and read to me while she ran her finger under the words. That was it, except to read always with a lively expression in her voice and eyes, to answer my questions, and from time to time to give me some practice with different letter sounds. One thing more is important. For a long time we would *sing*, "A, B, C, D, E, F, G,.....H, I, J, K, LMNOP..." and so on, every single day. We learned to love

each letter. She would read tough stories as well as easy ones. Truth is, I don't think she could readily tell the difference any more than I could. The books had some pictures but only a few; words made up the center of attention. Pictures have nothing at all to do with learning to love reading, except too many of them will pretty much guarantee that it never happens.

Over fifty years ago my mother Bootie Zimmer chose to teach me to read well. She had no degrees, no government salary, no outside encouragement, yet her private choice to make me a reader was my passport to a good and adventurous life. Bootie, the daughter of a Bavarian printer, said "Nuts!" to the Prussian system. She voted for her own right to decide, and for that I will always be in her debt. She gave me a love of language and it didn't cost much. Anybody could have the same, if schooling hadn't abandoned its duty so flagrantly.

False Premises

The religious purpose of modern schooling was announced clearly by the legendary University of Wisconsin sociologist Edward A. Ross in 1901 in his famous book, *Social Control*. Your librarian should be able to locate a copy for you without much trouble. In it Ed Ross wrote these words for his prominent following: "Plans are underway to replace community, family, and church with propaganda, education, and mass media....the State shakes loose from Church, reaches out to School.... People are only little plastic lumps of human dough." *Social Control* revolutionized the discipline of sociology and had powerful effects on the other human sciences: in social science it guided the direction of political science, economics, and psychology; in biology it influenced genetics, eugenics, and psychobiology. It played a critical role in the conception and design of molecular biology.

There you have it in a nutshell. The whole problem with modern schooling. It rests on a nest of false premises. People are not little plastic lumps of dough. They are not blank tablets as John Locke said they were, they are not machines as de La Mettrie hoped, not vegetables as Friedrich Froebel, inventor of kindergartens, hypothesized, not organic mechanisms as Wilhelm Wundt taught every psychology department in America at the turn of the century, nor are they repertoires of behaviors as Watson and Skinner wanted. They are not, as the new crop of systems thinkers would have it, mystically harmonious microsystems interlocking with grand macrosystems in a dance of atomic forces. I don't want to be crazy about this; locked in a lecture hall or a bull session there's probably no more harm in these theories than reading too many Italian sonnets all at one sitting. But when each of these suppositions is sprung free to serve as a foundation for school experiments, it leads to frightfully oppressive practices.

One of the ideas that empty-child thinking led directly to was the notion that human breeding could be enhanced or retarded as plant and animal breeding was—by scientific gardeners and husbandmen. Of course, the time scale over which this was plotted to happen was quite long. Nobody expected it to be like breeding fruit flies, but it was a major academic, governmental, and even military item generously funded until Hitler's proactive program (following America's lead) grew so embarrassing by 1939 that our own projects and plans were made more circumspect.

Back at the beginning of the twentieth century, the monstrously influential Edward Thorndike of Columbia Teachers College said that school would establish conditions for "selective breeding before the masses take things into their own hands." The religious purpose of modern schooling was embarrassingly evident back when Ross and Thorndike were on center stage, but they were surrounded by many like-minded friends. Another major architect of standardized testing, H.H. Goddard, said in his book *Human Efficiency* (1920) that government schooling was about "the perfect organization of the hive." He said standardized testing was a way to make lower classes recognize their own inferiority. Like wearing a dunce cap, it would discourage them from breeding and having ambition. Goddard was head of the Psychology Department at Princeton, so imagine the effect he had on the minds of the doctoral candidates he coached, and there were hundreds. We didn't leave the religious purpose of modern schooling back in the early years of the century. In April of 1996, Al Shanker of the AFT said in his regular *New York Times* split-page advertisement that every teacher was really a priest.

A System Of State Propaganda

Something strange is going on in schools and has been going on for quite some time. Whatever it is does not arise from the main American traditions. As closely as I can track the thing through the attitudes, practices, and stated goals of the shadowy crew who make a good living skulking around educational "laboratories," think tanks, and foundations, we are experiencing an attempt, successful so far, to reimpose the strong-state, strong social class attitudes of England and Germany on the United States—the very attitudes we threw off in the American Revolution. And in this counter-revolution the state churches of England and Germany have been replaced by the secular church of forced government schooling.

Advertising, public relations, and stronger forms of quasi-religious propaganda are so pervasive in our schools, even in "alternative" schools, that independent judgment is suffocated in mass-produced secondary experiences and market-tested initiatives. Lifetime Learning Systems, one of the many new corporations formed to dig gold from our conditions of schooling, announced to its corporate clients, "School is the ideal time to influence attitudes, build long-term loyalties, introduce new products, test-market, promote sampling and trial usage—and above all—to generate immediate sales."

Arnold Toynbee, the establishment's favorite historian in mid-twentieth-century America, said in his monumental *Study of History* that the original promise of universal education had been destroyed as soon as *the school laws were passed*, a destruction caused by "the possibility of turning education to account as a means of amusement for the masses" and a means of "profit for the enterprising persons by whom the amusement is purveyed." This opportunistic conversion quickly followed mass schooling's introduction when fantastic profit potential set powerful forces in motion:

The bread of universal education is no sooner cast upon the water than a shoal of sharks arises from the depths and devours the children's bread under the educator's very eyes.

In Toynbee's analysis "the dates speak for themselves":

The edifice of universal education was, roughly speaking, completed... in 1870; and the Yellow Press was invented twenty years later—as soon, that is, as the first generation of children from the national schools had acquired sufficient purchasing power—by a stroke of irresponsible genius which had divined that the educational labour of love could be made to yield a royal profit.

But vultures attending the inception of forced compulsion schooling attracted more ferocious predators:

[The commercial institutions that set about at once to prey on forced mass schooling] attracted the attention of the rulers of modern...national states. If press lords could make millions by providing idle amusement for the half-educated, serious statesman could draw, not money perhaps, but power from the same source. The modern dictators have deposed the press lords and substituted for crude and debased private entertainment an equally crude and debased system of state propaganda.

The Ideology Of The Text

Looking back on the original period of school formation in her study of American history textbooks, *America Revised*, Frances Fitzgerald remarked on the profound changes that emerged following suggestions issued by sociologists and social thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The original history of our institutions and the documents which protect our unique liberties gradually began to be effaced. Fitzgerald raises the puzzle of textbook alteration:

The ideology that lies behind these texts is rather difficult to define.... it does not fit usual political

patterns....the texts never indicate any line of action....authors avoid what they choose to and some of them avoid main issues....they fail to develop any original ideas....they confuse social sciences with science....clouds of jargon....leave out ideas....historical names are given no character, they are cipher people....*there are no conflicts, only "problems"*. [emphasis added]

Indeed, the texts may be unfathomable, and that may be the editorial intent.

The National Adult Literacy Survey

In 1982, Anthony Oettinger, a member of the private discussion group called the Council on Foreign Relations, asked an audience of communications executives this question: "Do we really have to have everybody literate—writing and reading in the traditional sense—when we have means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?" Oettinger suggested "our idea of literacy" is "obsolete." Eighty-three years earlier John Dewey had written in "The Primary Education Fetish" that "the plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to be a perversion."

For the balance of this discussion I'm going to step into deeper water, first reviewing what reading in a Western alphabet really means and what makes it a reasonably easy skill to transmit or to self-teach, and then tackling what happened to deprive the ordinary person of the ability to manage it very well. I want to first show you *how*, then answer the more speculative question *why*.

The National Adult Literacy Survey represents 190 million U.S. adults over age sixteen with an average school attendance of 12.4 years. The survey is conducted by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey. It ranks adult Americans into five levels. Here is its 1993 analysis:

Forty-two million Americans over the age of sixteen can't read. Some of this group can write their names on Social Security cards and fill in height, weight, and birth spaces on application forms.

Fifty million can recognize printed words on a fourth- and fifth-grade level. They cannot write simple messages or letters.

Fifty-five to sixty million are limited to sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade reading. A majority of this group could not figure out the price per ounce of peanut butter in a 20-ounce jar costing \$1.99 when told they could round the answer off to a whole number.

Thirty million have ninth- and tenth-grade reading proficiency. This group (and all preceding) cannot understand a simplified written explanation of the procedures used by attorneys and judges in selecting juries.

About 3.5 percent of the 26,000-member sample demonstrated literacy skills adequate to do traditional college study, a level 30 percent of all U.S. high school students reached in 1940, and which 30 percent of secondary students in other developed countries can reach today. This last fact alone should warn you how misleading comparisons drawn from international student competitions really are, since the samples each country sends are small elite ones, unrepresentative of the entire student population. But behind the bogus superiority a real one is concealed.

Ninety-six and a half percent of the American population is mediocre to illiterate where deciphering print is concerned. This is no commentary on their intelligence, but without ability to take in primary information from print and to interpret it they are at the mercy of commentators who tell them what things mean. A

working definition of immaturity might include an excessive need for other people to interpret information for us.

Certainly it's possible to argue that bad readers aren't victims at all but perpetrators, cursed by inferior biology to possess only shadows of intellect. That's what bell-curve theory, evolutionary theory, aristocratic social theory, eugenics theory, strong-state political theory, and some kinds of theology are about. All agree most of us are inferior, if not downright dangerous. The integrity of such theoretical outlooks— at least where reading was concerned—took a stiff shot on the chin from America. Here, democratic practice allowed a revolutionary generation to learn how to read. Those granted the opportunity took advantage of it brilliantly.

Name Sounds, Not Things

So how was the murder of American reading ability pulled off? I'll tell you in a second, but come back first to classical Greece where the stupendous invention of the alphabet by Phoenicians was initially understood. The Phoenicians had an alphabetic language used to keep accounts, but the Greeks were the first to guess correctly that revolutionary power could be unleashed by transcending mere lists, using written language for the permanent storage of analysis, exhortation, visions, and other things. After a period of experiment the Greeks came up with a series of letters to represent sounds of their language. Like the Phoenicians, they recognized the value of naming each letter in a way distinct from its sound value—as every human being has a name distinct from his or her personality, as numbers have names for reference.

Naming sounds *rather than things* was the breakthrough! While the number of things to be pictured is impossibly large, the number of sounds is strictly limited. In English, for example, most people recognize only forty-four.¹

The problem, which American families once largely solved for themselves, is this: in English, a Latin alphabet has been imposed on a Germanic language with multiple non-Germanic borrowings, and it doesn't quite fit. Our 44 sounds are spelled 400+ different ways. That sounds horrible, but in reality in the hands of even a mediocre teacher, it's only annoying; in the hands of a good one, a thrilling challenge. Actually, 85 percent of the vast word stock of English can be read with knowledge of only 70 of the phonograms. A large number of the remaining irregularities seldom occur and can be remastered on an as-needed basis. Meanwhile a whole armory of mnemonic tricks like "If a 'c' I chance to spy, place the 'e' before the 'i'" exists to get new readers over the common humps. Inexpensive dictionaries, spell-check typewriters, computers, and other technology are readily available these days to silently coach the fearful, but in my experience, that "fear" is neither warranted nor natural. Instead, it is engendered. Call it good business practice.

Also, communicating abstractions in picture language is a subtlety requiring more time and training to master than is available for most of us. Greeks now could organize ambitious concepts abstractly in written language, communicating accurately with each other over space and time much more readily than their competitors.

According to Mitford Mathews:²

The secret of their phenomenal advance was in their conception of the nature of a word. They reasoned that words were sounds or combinations of ascertainable sounds, and they held inexorably to the basic proposition that writing, properly executed, was a guide to sound. reading. A number of other good treatments are available for the newcomer.

Learning sound-sight correspondences comes first in an alphabetic language. Competence with the entire package of sounds corresponding to alphabet symbols comes quickly. After that anything can be read and its meaning inquired after. The substantial speaking vocabulary kids bring to school (6,000–10,000 words) can now be read at once, and understood.

When the Romans got the alphabet through the Etruscans they lost the old letter names so they invented new ones

making them closer to the letter sounds. That was a significant mistake which causes confusion in novice readers even today. Through conquest the Latin alphabet spread to the languages of Europe; Rome's later mutation into the Universal Christian Church caused Latin, the language of church liturgy, to flow into every nook and cranny of the former empire.

The Latin alphabet was applied to the English language by Christian missionaries in the seventh century. While it fused with spoken English this was far from a perfect fit. There were no single letters to stand for certain sounds. Scribes had to scramble to combine letters to approximate sounds that had no companion letter. This matching process was complicated over centuries by repeated borrowings from other languages and by certain massive sound shifts which still occupy scholars in trying to explain.

Before the spread of printing in the sixteenth century, not being able to read wasn't much of a big deal. There wasn't much to read. The principal volume available was the Bible, from which appropriate bits were read aloud by religious authorities during worship and on ceremonial occasions. Available texts were in Latin or Greek, but persistent attempts to provide translations was a practice thought to contain much potential for schism. An official English Bible, the Authorized King James Version, appeared in 1611, preempting all competitors in a bold stroke which changed popular destiny.

Instantly, the Bible became a universal textbook, offering insights both delicate and powerful, a vibrant cast of characters, brilliant verbal pyrotechnics and more to the humblest rascal who could read. Talk about a revolutionary awakening for ordinary people! The Bible was it, thanks to the dazzling range of models it provided in the areas of exegesis, drama, politics, psychology, characterization, plus the formidable reading skills it took to grapple with the Bible. A little more than three decades after this translation, the English king was deposed and beheaded. The connection was direct. Nothing would ever be the same again because too many good readers had acquired the proclivity of thinking for themselves.

The magnificent enlargement of imagination and voice that the Bible's exceptional catalogue of language and ideas made available awakened in ordinary people a powerful desire *to read* in order to read the Holy Book without a priest's mediation. Strenuous efforts were made to discourage this, but the Puritan Revolution and Cromwell's interregnum sent literacy surging. Nowhere was it so accelerated as in the British colonies in North America, a place already far removed from the royal voice.

Printing technology emerged. Like the computer in our own day, it was quickly incorporated into every corner of daily life. But there were still frequent jailings, whippings, and confiscations for seditious reading as people of substance came to realize how dangerous literacy could be.

Reading offered many delights. Cravings to satisfy curiosity about this Shakespeare fellow or to dabble in the musings of Lord Bacon or John Locke were now not difficult to satisfy. Spelling and layout were made consistent. Before long, prices of books dropped. All this activity intensified pressure on illiterate individuals to become literate. The net result of printing (and Protestantism, which urged communicants to go directly to the Word, eliminating the priestly middleman), stimulated the spread of roving teachers and small proprietary and church schools. A profession arose to satisfy demand for a popular way to understand what uses to make of books, and from this a demand to understand many things.

The "problem" with English phonics has been wildly exaggerated, sometimes by sincere people but most often by those who make a living as guides through the supposed perils of learning to read. These latter constitute a vast commercial empire with linkages among state education departments, foundations, publishers, authors of school readers, press, magazines, education journals, university departments of education, professional organizations, teachers, reading specialists, local administrators, local school boards, various politicians who facilitate the process and the U.S. offices of education, defense and labor.

2Mitford Mathews, *Teaching to Read Historically Considered* (1966). A brief, intelligent history of reading. A number of other good treatments are available for the newcomer.

The Meatgrinder Classroom

The first schoolman to seriously challenge what is known today as phonics was Friedrich Gedike, a disciple of Rousseau, director of a well-known gymnasium in Prussia. In 1791 he published the world's first look/say primer, *A Children's Reader Without the ABC's and Spelling*. The idea was to eliminate drill. Kids would learn through pictures following suggestions the legendary mystic and scholar Comenius set down in his famous *Orbis Pictus* of 1657.

After a brief splash and three editions, the fashion vanished for an excellent reason: As good as it sounds in theory, it doesn't work well at all in practice (although here and there exceptions are encountered and infuriatingly enough it can *seem* to work in the early years of first and second grade). Soon after that the rapidly developing reading power in phonetically trained children makes them capable of recognizing in print their entire speaking and listening vocabulary, while look/say trained readers can read without error only the words they have memorized as whole shapes, a relative handful.

This is devilishly complex terrain. Gedike's theory held that when enough words are ingested and recognized, the student *can figure out for himself* the seventy key phonograms of the English language. Indeed this is the only credible explanation which *could* account for the well-known phenomenon of children who teach themselves to read handily without the use of any system at all. I have no doubt children occasionally learn to read this way. Yet if true, how do we account for the grotesque record of whole-word instruction for over a century and a half in every conceivable school setting?

Money, time, attention, and caring adults in profusion, all have been available to make this alternative method work to teach reading proficiency, yet its record in competition with the old-fashioned alphabet system is horrifying. What might account for this?

I have a hunch based on a decade of ruminating. Since no one has yet bothered to assemble a large group of self-taught good readers to ask them how it happened, let my hunch serve as a working hypothesis for you to chew upon at your leisure. Consider first the matter of *time*. The average five-year-old can master all of the seventy phonograms in six weeks. At that point he can read just about anything fluently. Can he *understand* everything? No, of course not. But also, no synthetic barrier to understanding is being interposed by weird-looking words to be memorized whole, either. Paulo Freire taught ignorant *campesinos* with no tradition of literacy at all to read in thirty hours. They were adults, with different motivations than children, but when he showed them a sentence and they realized it said "The land belongs to the tiller," they were hooked. That's Jesuit savvy for you.

Back to this matter of time. By the end of the fourth grade, phonics-trained students are at ease with an estimated 24,000 words. Whole-word trained students have memorized about 1,600 words and can successfully guess at some thousands more, but also *unsuccessfully* guess at thousands, too. One reigning whole-word expert has called reading "a psycholinguistic guessing game" in which the reader is not extracting the writer's meaning but constructing a meaning of his own.

While there is an attractive side to this that is ignored by critics of whole language (and I number myself among these), the value doesn't begin to atone for the theft of priceless reading time and guided practice. As long as whole-language kids are retained in a hothouse environment, shielded from linguistic competition, things seem idyllic, but once mixed together with phonetically trained kids of similar age and asked to avail themselves of the intellectual treasure locked up in words, the result is not so pretty. Either the deficient kid must retreat from the field with a whopping sense of inferiority, or, worse, he must advance aggressively into the fray, claiming books are overrated, that thinking and judgment are merely matters of opinion. The awful truth is that circumstances hardly give us the luxury of testing Gedike's hypothesis about kids being able to deduce the rules of language from a handful of words. Humiliation makes mincemeat of most of them long before the trial is fairly joined.

So, the second hunch I have is that where whole-word might work when it works at all is in a comfortable, protected environment without people around to laugh derisively at the many wretched mistakes you must make on

the way to becoming a Columbus of language. But in case you hadn't noticed, schools *aren't* safe places for the young to guess at the meanings of things. Only an imbecile would pretend that school isn't a pressure-cooker of psychodrama. Wherever children are gathered into groups by compulsion, a pecking order soon emerges in which malice, mockery, intimidation of the weak, envy, and a whole range of other nasty characteristics hold sway, like that famous millpond of Huxley's, whose quiet surface mirroring fall foliage conceals a murderous subterranean world whose law is eat or be eaten.

That's melodramatic, I suppose, yet thirty classroom years and a decade more as a visitor in hundreds of other schools have shown me what a meatgrinder the peaceful classroom really is. Bill is wondering whether he will be beaten again on the way to the lunchroom; Molly is paralyzed with fear that the popular Jean will make loud fun of her prominent teeth; Ronald is digging the point of a sharpened pencil into the neck of Herbert who sits in front of him, all the while whispering he will get Herb good if he gets Ron in trouble with the teacher; Alan is snapping a rubber band at Flo; Ralph is about to call Leonard "trailer park trash" for the three-hundredth time that day, not completely clear he knows what it means, yet enjoying the anguish it brings to Leonard's face; Greta, the most beautiful girl in the room, is practicing ogling shyer boys, then cutting them dead when she evokes any hopeful smiles in response; Willie is slowly shaken down for a dollar by Phil; and Mary's single mom has just received an eviction notice.

Welcome to another day in an orderly, scientific classroom. Teacher may have a permanent simper pasted on her face, but it's deadly serious, the world she presides over, a bad place to play psycholinguistic guessing games which involve sticking one's neck out in front of classmates as the rules of language are empirically derived. A method that finds mistakes to be "charming stabs in the right direction" may be onto something person-to-person or in the environment of a loving home, but it's dynamically unsuited to the forge of forced schooling.

The Ignorant Schoolmaster

After Gedike, the next innovator to hit on a reading scheme was Jean Joseph Jacotot, a grand genius, much misunderstood. A professor of literature at nineteen, Jacotot discovered a method of teaching nonspeakers of French the French language beginning not with primers but with Fenelon's *Telemachus*. Jacotot read aloud slowly while students followed his reading in a dual translation—to their own familiar language and to Fenelon's spoken French. Then the process was repeated. After the group reading, each student individually dismantled the entire book into parts, into smaller parts, into paragraphs, into sentences, into words, and finally into letters and sounds. This followed the "natural" pattern of scientists it was thought, beginning with wholes, and reducing them to smaller and smaller elements.

Jacotot has a reputation as a whole-word guru, but any resemblance to contemporary whole-word reading in Jacotot is illusion. His method shifts the burden for analysis largely from the shoulders of the teacher to the student. The trappings of holistic noncompetitiveness are noticeably absent. Penalty for failure in his class was denial of advancement. Everyone succeeded in Jacotot's system, but then, his students were highly motivated, self-selected volunteers, all of college age.

From Jacotot we got the idea anybody can teach anything. His was the concept of the ignorant schoolmaster. It should surprise no one that the ideas of Jacotot interested Prussians who brought his system back to Germany and modified it for younger children. For them, however, a *book* seemed too impractical a starting point, perhaps a *sentence* would be better or a *single* word. Eventually it was the latter settled upon. Was this the genesis of whole-word teaching which eventually dealt American reading ability a body blow?

The answer is a qualified No. In the German "normal word" method the whole-word was not something to be memorized but a specimen of language to be analyzed into syllables. The single word was made a self-conscious vehicle for learning letters. Once letter sounds were known, reading instruction proceeded traditionally. To a great extent, this is the method my German mother used with my sister and me to teach us to read fluently before we

ever saw first grade.

Frank Had A Dog; His Name Was Spot

Two flies now enter the reading ointment in the persons of Horace Mann and his second wife, Mary Peabody. There is raw material here for a great intrigue novel: in the early 1830s, a minister in Hartford, Thomas Gallaudet, invented a sight-reading, look-say method to use with the deaf. Like Jacotot, Gallaudet was a man of unusual personal force and originality. He served as director at the asylum for the education of the deaf and dumb in Hartford. Deaf mutes couldn't learn a sound-symbol system, it was thought, so Gallaudet devised a sight-reading vocabulary of fifty whole-words which he taught through pictures. Then his deaf students learned a manual alphabet which permitted them to indicate letters with their fingers and communicate with others.

Even in light of the harm he inadvertently caused, it's hard not to be impressed by Gallaudet. In Gallaudet's system, writing transmuted from a symbolic record of *sounds* to a symbolic record of *pictures*. Gallaudet had reinvented English as ancient Babylonian! One of his former teachers, William Woodbridge, then editor of the *American Annals of Education*, received a long, detailed letter in which Gallaudet described his flash-card method and demanded that education be regarded as a science like chemistry: "Mind, like matter, can be made subject to experiment." Fifty words could be learned by memory *before* introducing the alphabet. By removing the "dull and tedious" normal method, great interest "has [been] excited in the mind of the little learner."

Historically, three important threads run together here: 1) that learning should be scientific, and learning places a laboratory; 2) that words be learned ideographically; 3) that relieving boredom and tedium should be an important goal of pedagogy. Each premise was soon pushed to extremes. These themes institutionalized would ultimately require a vast bureaucracy to enforce. But all this lay in the future.

Gallaudet had adopted the point of view of a deaf-mute who had to make his way without assistance from sound to spoken language. Samuel Blumenfeld's analysis of what was wrong in this is instructive:

It led to serious confusions in Gallaudet's thinking concerning two very different processes; that of learning to speak one's native language and that of learning to read it. In teaching the deaf to read by sight he was also teaching them language by sight for the first time. They underwent two learning processes, not one. But a normal child came to school already with the knowledge of several thousand words in his speaking vocabulary, with a much greater intellectual development which the sense of sound afforded him. In learning to read it was not necessary to teach him what he already knew, to repeat the process of learning to speak. The normal child did not learn his language by learning to read. He learned to read in order to help him expand his use of the language.

In 1830, Gallaudet published *The Child's Picture Defining and Reading Book*, a book for children with normal hearing, seeking to generalize his method to all. In its preface, the book sets down for the first time basic whole-word protocols. Words will be taught as representing objects and ideas, not as sounds represented by letters.

He who controls language controls the public mind, a concept well understood by Plato. Indeed, the manipulation of language was at the center of curriculum at the Collegia of Rome, in the Jesuit academies, and the private schools maintained for children of the influential classes; it made up an important part of the text of Machiavelli; it gave rise to the modern arts and sciences of advertising and public relations. The whole-word method, honorably derived and employed by men like Gallaudet, was at the same time a tool to be used by any regime or interest with a stake in *limiting* the growth of intellect.

Gallaudet's primer, lost to history, was published in 1836. One year later, the Boston School Committee was inaugurated under the direction of Horace Mann. Although no copies of the primer have survived, Blumenfeld tells us, "From another source we know that its first line was, *Frank had a dog; his name was Spot.*" On August 2,

1836, Gallaudet's primer was adopted by the Boston Primary School Committee on an experimental basis. A year later a report was issued pronouncing the method a success on the basis of *speed in learning* when compared to the alphabet system, and of bringing a "pleasant tone" to the classroom by removing "the old unintelligible, and irksome mode of teaching certain arbitrary marks, or letters, by certain arbitrary sounds."

A sight vocabulary is faster to learn than letters and phonograms, but the gain is a Trojan horse; only after several years have passed does the sight reader's difficulty learning words from outside sources begin to become apparent. By that time conditions made pressing by the social situation of the classroom and demands from the world at large combine to make it hard to retrace the ground lost.

Mann endorsed Gallaudet's primer in his *Second Annual Report* (1838). His endorsement, Gallaudet's general fame and public adulation, erroneous reports circulating at the time that mighty Prussia was using a whole-word system, and possibly the prospect of fame and a little profit, caused Mann's own wife, Mary Tyler Peabody—whose family names were linked to a network of powerful families up and down the Eastern seaboard—to write a whole-word primer. The Mann family was only one of a host of influential voices being raised against the traditional reading instructions in the most literate nation on earth. In Woodbridge's *Annals of Education*, a steady tattoo was directed against spelling and the alphabet method.

By the time of the Gallaudet affair, both Manns were under the spell of phrenology, a now submerged school of psychology and the brainchild of a German physician. Francois Joseph Gall, in working with the insane, had become convinced he had located the physical site of personality traits like love, benevolence, acquisitiveness, and many more. He could provide a map of their positions inside the skull! These faculties signaled their presence, said Gall, by making bumps on the visible exterior of the cranium. The significance of this to the future of reading is that among Gall's claims was: too much reading causes insanity. The Manns agreed.

One of Gall's converts was a Scottish lawyer named George Combe. On October 8, 1838, Mann wrote in his diary that he had met "the author of that extraordinary book, *The Constitution of Man*, the doctrines of which will work the same change in metaphysical science that Lord Bacon wrought in natural." The book was Combe's. Suddenly the Mann project to downgrade reading acquired a psychological leg to accompany the political, social, economic, and religious legs it already possessed. Unlike other arguments against enlightenment of ordinary people—all of which invoked one or another form of class interest—what psychological phrenology offered was a scientific argument based on the supposed best interests of the child. Thus a potent weapon fell into pedagogy's hands which would not be surrendered after phrenology was discredited. If one psychology could not convince, another might. By appearing to avoid any argument from special interest, the scientific case took the matter of who should learn what out of the sphere of partisan politics into a loftier realm of altruism.

Meanwhile Combe helped Mann line up his great European tour of 1843, which was to result in the shattering *Seventh Report* to the Boston School Committee of 1844. (The *Sixth* had been a plea to phrenologize classrooms!) This new report said: "I am satisfied our greatest error in teaching children to read lies in beginning with the alphabet." Mann was attempting to commit Massachusetts children to the hieroglyphic system of Gallaudet. The result was an outcry from Boston's schoolmasters, a battle that went on in the public press for many months culminating (on the schoolmaster's side) in this familiar lament:

Education is a great concern; it has often been tampered with by vain theorists; it has suffered from the stupid folly and the delusive wisdom of its treacherous friends; and we hardly know which have injured it most. Our conviction is that it has much more to hope from the collected wisdom and common prudence of the community than from the suggestions of the individual. Locke injured it by his theories, and so did Rousseau, and so did Milton. All their plans were too splendid to be true. It is to be advanced by conceptions, neither soaring above the clouds, nor groveling on the earth—but by those plain, gradual, productive, common sense improvements, which use may encourage and experience suggest. We are in favor of advancement, provided it be towards usefulness....

We love the secretary but we hate his theories. They stand in the way of substantial education. It is impossible for a

sound mind not to hate them.

The Pedagogy Of Literacy

Between Mann's death and the great waves of Italian immigration after the 1870s, the country seemed content with McGuffey readers, Webster Spelling Books, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the *Bible*, and the familiar alphabet method for breaking the sound code. But beginning about the year 1880 with the publication of Francis W. Parker's *Supplementary Reading for Primary Schools* (and his *Talks on Pedagogics*, 1883), a new attack on reading was mounted.

Parker was a loud, affable, flamboyant teacher with little academic training himself, a man forced to resign as principal of a Chicago teachers college in 1899 for reasons not completely honorable. Shortly thereafter, at the age of sixty-two, he was suddenly selected to head the School of Education at Rockefeller's new University of Chicago,¹ a university patterned after great German research establishments like Heidelberg, Berlin, and Leipzig.

As supervisor of schools in Boston in a former incarnation, Parker had asserted boldly that learning to read was learning a vocabulary which can be instantly recalled as ideas when certain symbolic signposts are encountered. Words are learned, he said, by repeated acts of association of the word with the idea it represents.

Parker originated the famous Quincy Movement, the most recognizable starting point for progressive schooling. Its reputation rested on four ideas: 1) *group activities* in which the individual is submerged for the good of the collective; 2) *emphasis on the miracles of science (as opposed to traditional classical studies of history, philosophy, literature)*; 3) *informal instruction* in which teacher and student dress casually, call each other by first names, treat all priorities as very flexible, etc; 4) *the elimination of harsh discipline* as psychologically damaging to children. Reading was not stressed in Parker schools.

Parker's work and that of other activists antagonistic to reading received a giant forward push in 1885 from one of the growing core of America's new "psychologists" who had studied with Wilhelm Wundt at Leipzig. James McKeen Cattell boldly announced he had proven, using the tachistoscope, *that we read whole words and not letters*. Cattell's lusty ambition resounds in his cry of triumph:

These results are important enough to prove those to be wrong who hold with Kant that psychology can never become an exact science.

Until 1965 no one bothered to check Cattell's famous experiment with the tachistoscope. When they did, it was found Cattell had been dead wrong. People read letters, not words.

It was out of the cauldron of Columbia Teachers College that the most ferocious advocate of whole-word therapy came: Edward Burke Huey was his name, his mentor, G. Stanley Hall. In 1908 they published an influential book, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, which laid out the revolution in a way that sent a message of bonanzas to come to the new educational book publishing industry. Publishing was a business just beginning to reap fantastic profits from contracts with the new factory schools. Centralized management was proving a pot of gold for lucky book contractors in big cities. The message was this: "Children should be taught to read English as if it were Chinese: ideographically."

Huey was even more explicit: he said *children learned to read too well and too early and that was bad for them*:

He must not, by reading adult grammatical and logical forms, begin exercises in mental habits which will violate his childhood.

As Blumenfeld (to whom I owe much of the research cited here) explains, Huey concocted a novel justification

based on Darwinian evolution for jettisoning the alphabet system:

The history of the language in which picture-writing was long the main means of written communication has here a wealth of suggestions for the framers of the new primary course. It is not from mere perversity that the boy chalks or carves his records on a book and desk.... There is here a correspondence with, if not a direct recapitulation of the life of the race; and we owe it to the child to encourage his living through the best there is in this pictography stage....

!Mrs. Anita McCormick Blaine, daughter of the inventor of the harvesting machine, became his patron, purchasing the College of Education for him with a contribution of \$1million.

Dick And Jane

As many before him, Huey missed entirely the brilliant Greek insight that *reading* and *understanding* are two different things. Good reading is the fluent and effortless cracking of the symbol-sound code which puts understanding within easy reach. Understanding is the translation of that code into meaning.

It is for many people a natural and fairly harmless mistake. Since they read for meaning, the code-cracking step is forgotten. Forgotten, that is, by those who read well. For others, self-disgust and despair engendered by halting progress *in decoding sounds* sets into play a fatal chain of circumstances which endangers the relationship to print for a long time, sometimes wrecking it forever. If decoding is a painful effort, filled with frustrating errors, finally a point is reached when the reader says, in effect, *to the devil with it*.

Another piece of dangerous philosophy is concealed inside whole-word practice—the notion that a piece of writing is only an orange one squeezes in order to extract something called meaning, some bit of data. The sheer luxury of putting your mind in contact with the greatest minds of history across time and space, *feeling* the rhythm of their thought, the sallies and retreats, the marshaling of evidence, the admixture of humor or beauty of observation and many more attributes of the power and value language possesses, has something in common with being coached by Bill Walsh in football or Toscanini in orchestra conducting. *How* these men say what they say is as important as the translating their words into your own. The music of language is what poetry and much rhetoric are about, the literal meaning often secondary. Powerful speech depends on this understanding.

By 1920, the sight-word method was being used in new wave progressive schools. In 1927, another professor at Columbia Teachers College, Arthur Gates, laid the foundation for his own personal fortune by writing a book called *The Improvement of Reading*, which purported to muster thirty-one experimental studies proving that sight reading was superior to phonics. All these studies are either trivial or highly ambiguous at best and at times, in a practice widely encountered throughout higher education research in America, Gates simply draws the conclusions he wants from facts which clearly lead elsewhere.

But his *piece de resistance* is a comparison of first-grade deaf pupils tutored in the whole-word method with Detroit first graders. The scores of the two groups are almost identical, causing Gates to declare this a most convincing demonstration. Yet it had been well known for almost a century that deaf children taught with a method created expressly for deaf children only gain a temporary advantage which disappears quickly. In spite of this cautionary detail Gates called this "conclusive proof" *that normal children taught this way would improve even faster!*

Shortly after the book's publication, Arthur Gates was given the task of authoring Macmillan's basal reader series, a pure leap into whole-word method by the most prestigious education publisher of them all. Macmillan was a corporation with wide-reaching contacts able to enhance an author's career. In 1931, Gates contributed to the growth of a new reading industry by writing an article for *Parents* magazine, "New Ways of Teaching Reading."

Parents were told to abandon any residual loyalty they might have to the barren, formal older method and to embrace the new as true believers. A later article by a Gates associate was expressly tailored for "those parents concerned because children do not know their letters." It explained that "the modern approach to reading" eliminated the boredom of code-cracking.

With its finger in the wind, Scott, Foresman, the large educational publisher, ordered a revision of its Elson Basic Readers drawn on the traditional method, a series which had sold 50 million copies to that date. To head up the mighty project, the publisher brought in William S. Gray, dean of the University of Chicago College of Education, to write its all new whole-word pre-primer and primer books, a series marking the debut of two young Americans who would change millions of minds into mush during their long tenure in school classrooms. Their names were Dick and Jane. After Gates and Gray, most major publishers fell into line with other whole-word series and in the words of Rudolf Flesch, "inherited the kingdom of American education," with its fat royalties. Blumenfeld does the student of American schooling a great service when he compares this original 1930 Dick and Jane with its 1951 successor:

"In 1930, the Dick and Jane *Pre-Primer* taught 68 sign words in 39 pages of story text, with an illustration per page, a total of 565 words—and a Teacher's Guidebook of 87 pages. In 1951, the same book was expanded to 172 pages with 184 illustrations, a total of 2,603 words—and a Guidebook of 182 pages to teach a sight vocabulary of only 58 words!" Without admitting any disorder, the publisher was protecting itself from this system, and the general public, without quite knowing why, was beginning to look at its schools with unease.

By 1951, entire public school systems were bailing out on phonics and jumping on the sight-reading bandwagon. Out of the growing number of reading derelicts poised to begin tearing the schools apart which tormented them, a giant remedial reading industry was spawned, a new industry completely in the hands of the very universities who had with one hand written the new basal readers, and with the other taught a generation of new teachers about the wonders of the whole-word method.

Mute evidence that Scott, Foresman wasn't just laughing all the way to the bank, but was actively trying to protect its nest egg in *Dick and Jane*, was its canny multiplication of words intended to be learned. In 1930, the word *look* was repeated 8 times; in 1951, 110 times; in the earlier version *oh* repeats 12 times, in the later 138 times; in the first, see gets 27 repetitions, and in the second, 176.1

The legendary children's book author, Dr. Seuss, creator of a string of best-sellers using a controlled "scientific" vocabulary supplied by the publisher, demonstrated his own awareness of the mindlessness of all this in an interview he gave in 1981:

I did it for a textbook house and they sent me a word list. That was due to the Dewey revolt in the twenties, in which they threw out phonics reading and went to a word recognition as if you're reading a Chinese pictograph instead of blending sounds or different letters. I think killing phonics was one of the greatest causes of illiteracy in the country.

Anyway they had it all worked out that a healthy child at the age of four can only learn so many words in a week. So there were two hundred and twenty-three words to use in this book. I read the list three times and I almost went out of my head. I said, "I'll read it once more and if I can find two words that rhyme, that'll be the title of my book." I found "cat" and "hat" and said, the title of my book will be *The Cat in the Hat*.

For the forty-one months beginning in January of 1929 and concluding in June of 1932, there were eighty-eight articles written in various pedagogical journals on the subject of reading difficulties and remedial teaching; in the forty-one months beginning in July of 1935 and concluding in December of 1938, the number rose almost 200 percent to 239. The first effects of the total victory of whole-word reading philosophy were being reflected in academic journals as the once mighty reading Samson of America was led eyeless to Gaza with the rest of the slaves.

11955 proved to be a year of great frustration to the reading combine because of the publication of Rudolf Flesch's hostile *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which precisely analyzed the trouble and laid it at the doorstep of the reading establishment. The book was a hot seller for over a year, continuing to reverberate through the reading world for a long time thereafter. In 1956, 56,000 reading professionals formed a look/say defense league called the International Reading Association. It published three journals as bibles of enthusiasm: *The Reading Teacher*, *The Journal of Reading*, *The Reading Research Quarterly*. Between 1961 and 1964, a new generation of academics shape-shifted look/say into psycholinguistics under the leadership of Frank Smith, an excellent writer when not riding his hobby horse, and Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, senior authors at Scott, Foresman who had been widely quoted as calling reading "a psycholinguistic guessing game." From 1911 to 1981, there were 124 legitimate studies attempting to prove Cattell and the other whole-word advocates right. Not a single one confirmed whole-word reading as effective.