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On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy

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In this article I explore what it means to read a historical text. In doing so, I draw on my research with historians and high school students, who thought aloud as they reviewed a set of texts about the American Revolution. I begin by providing an overview of what I learned from historians, sketching in broad strokes an image of the skilled reader of history. Next, I compare this image to what emerged from an analysis of high school students' responses to these same documents. I then speculate about the source of differences between these two groups, arguing that each group brings to these texts a distinctive epistemological stance, one that shapes and guides the meanings that are derived from text. I end by outlining the implications of this work for how we define reading comprehension and how we define the place of history in the school curriculum.

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In an essay about reading historical texts, William Willcox asks us to consider two accounts of the storming of the Bastille, one by a member of the *ancien regime* and the other by a Jacobin:

> No matter how honest the two men may have been, the event described by one has a quite different flavor from that described by the other. The historian can never see the event itself, in Ranke's famous phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; he can see it only through witnesses, and is as dependent on their eyes and emotions as on their pens. This is not to say that he must share their bias; quite the contrary. But he must understand it in order to allow for it.[1]

The call to "understand the bias" of a source is quite common in the reflective writings of historians. Yet as a guild, historians have been uncharacteristically tight-lipped about how they do it.[2] This is unfortunate, for the process is by no means self-evident. How exactly do historians put emotion back into the inanimate texts that they read? And what about students of history, for whom a historical text is most often a history textbook? Are they capable of engaging in this form of textual animation? Do students realize that they are as dependent on authors' hearts as on their heads?

My purpose in this article is to explore these and other questions.[3] I do so not as a historian, though I confess to a deep affinity for that discipline, but as an educational psychologist interested in how people learn from written texts. In addressing these questions, I draw on my research with historians and high school students who thought aloud as they reviewed a series of historical documents. I begin by providing an overview of what I learned from historians, sketching in broad strokes an image of the skilled reader of history. Next, I compare this image to what emerged from an analysis of high school students' responses to these same documents. I then speculate about the source of differences between historians and students. I end by outlining some of the implications of this work for how we define reading comprehension and how we define the place of history in the school curriculum.

[1]William B. Willcox, "An Historian Looks at Social Change," in *The Craft of American History*, ed. A. S. Eisenstadt (New York: Harper, 1966), 25.

[2]For a sampling of "how to" books in history see Henry Steele Commager, *The Nature and Study of History* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1966); Wood Gray, *Historian's Handbook: A Key to the Study and Writing of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959); Alan Nevins, *Gateway to History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1962); or R. J. Shafer, *A Guide to Historical Method* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey, 1969). Gray, in particular, waxes mystical when he says that the reading of primary sources relies on a "sort of sixth sense that will alert [historians] to the tell-tale signs" (p. 36). Two notable exceptions to this trend are J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971) and James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

[3]In writing this article, I benefited from the sage advice and timely reproof offered by Chuck Burgess, Larry Cuban, Catherine Crain-Thoreson, Elliot Eisner, Pam Grossman, Bob Hampel, Debby Kerdeman, David Madsen, David Olson, Susan Monas, Shelia Valencia, and Suzanne Wilson. Because I heeded only some of their suggestions, I, alone, take responsibility for the contents of this article. An earlier version of this article was presented at the MacArthur "Languages of Thinking" conference at Harvard University in October, 1990, where I benefited from the thoughtful comments of Janet Astington, Bob Ennis, Jack Lockhead, David Olson, Dave Perkins, and their students. The research reported here was funded by the Spencer Foundation, and that support is gratefully acknowledged.

The Skilled Reading of History

Let me begin by explaining how my readings with historians and students were generated. I sat down with eight historians and taught them to think aloud as they read documents about the Battle of Lexington, the opening volley of the Revolutionary War. (The same procedure was followed for eight high school students, but more about them later.) The think-aloud technique asks people to verbalize their thoughts as they solve complex problems or read sophisticated texts, and departs from much experimental research by focusing on the intermediate processes of cognition, not just on its outcomes. Moreover, thinking aloud differs from its discredited ancestor, introspection, in two ways: first, it asks people to report their thoughts as they are heeded in memory, not minutes or days later; and, second, it asks people to verbalize the *contents* of their thoughts, not the processes used to generate them.[4]

I purposely recruited historians with varied specialties and backgrounds.[5] Some were steeped in the Colonial period, but others, such as a specialist in Japanese history and a medievalist, knew little more about the Revolution than what they remembered from high school. The texts I assembled were similarly varied, from eyewitness accounts and newspaper articles, to materials rarely considered in historical research, such as a passage from a school textbook and a piece of historical fiction.[6] In addition to asking historians to think aloud, I asked them to rank each document in terms of its trustworthiness as a historical source.

The first text I gave historians set the stage for the other seven documents they would read. This text was a letter sent on April 28, 1775, by Joseph Warren, president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, to Benjamin Franklin, the colonists' representative in London. After the blood-

[4]For a detailed discussion of the think-aloud methodology and its rationale, see K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon, *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports as Data* (Cambridge: MIT, 1984).

[5]Of the eight historians I studied, six held the Ph.D and two were doctoral candidates. Four historians considered themselves to be Americanists (and had taught American history), and four did not. In terms of doctoral training, the following institutions were represented: Wisconsin (3), Stanford (2), Berkeley (2), and Harvard (1).

[6]For the full text of these documents, as well as a detailed description of the methods and procedures followed, see Samuel S. Wineburg, "Historical Problem Solving: A Study of the Cognitive Processes Used in the Evaluation of Documentary and Pictorial Evidence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83 (March 1991): 73–87.

shed at Lexington, Warren assembled depositions from eyewitnesses, attached a cover letter, and sent off the bundle to Franklin. In this letter, he characterized the events at Lexington as "marks of ministerial vengeance against [Massachusetts-Bay] for refusing with her sister colonies a submission to slavery."[7] When JM, a specialist in Native American history well-versed in the Colonial period, read this sentence he remarked:

> What I think of is a book I read by Jack Rakove[8] talking about how one of the problems at the time was getting the colonies to hang together, and to try to get some unity. So the "refusing with her sister colonies" is kind of an appeal to the other groups.

The subtlety of this comment is easily missed. To begin, this is not a commentary on the literal text read by the historian, for there is nothing in the text about discord or disunity among the colonies. Furthermore, while it might make sense to see the letter as an "appeal," the letter was sent to Franklin for circulation among members of Parliament so the appeal is literally directed to Great Britain. Indeed, what JM sees here cannot be found on the page or represented in a diagram of textual propositions. What is most important to him is not what the text *says*, but what it *does*.

And what does the text do for JM? First of all, it casts the confrontation at Lexington not as a minor squabble between nervous farmers and tired soldiers, but as a meeting of the broadest import—a fateful clash between representatives of the King and those of the thirteen American colonies. The phrase "refusing with her sister colonies" thus carries a dual purpose: first, it provides a frame through which to view the deaths of eight men and, second, it asks readers in Baltimore or Savannah (to whom this document would also be circulated) to bind their fates to their Northern cousins. In other words, this "appeal" was only partially designed to stir passions in London; it was also intended to rally the forces at home.

It is not the literal text, or even the inferred text (as that word is commonly used), that this historian comprehends, but the *subtext*, a text of hidden and latent meanings. Subtexts of historical documents can be divided into two distinct but related spheres—the text as a rhetorical artifact and the text as a human artifact. In the first sphere, the text as a rhetorical artifact, historians try to reconstruct authors' purposes, intentions, and goals. But the subtext goes beyond a reconstruction of the intentions of the author,

[7]Warren's cover letter can be found in Peter S. Bennett, *What Happened on Lexington Green* (Menlo Park, Ca.: Addison-Wesley, 1970), 20. Warren's skills as a propagandist are detailed in Arthur B. Tourtellot, *Lexington and Concord: The Beginning of the War of the American Revolution* (New York: Norton, 1963), 212–36.

[8]JM refers here to the monograph by Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginning of National Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1976). The initials *JM* identify the historian speaking; in this article other participating historians are likewise identified by initials.

beyond the use of language as a linguistic technology for persuasion. In fact, many subtexts include elements that work at cross-purposes with authors' intentions, bringing to the surface convictions authors may have been unaware of or may have wished to conceal.[9] These aspects fall into the second sphere, the text as a human artifact, which relates to how texts frame reality and disclose information about their authors' assumptions, world views, and beliefs. It is a reading that leaps from the words authors *use* to the types of people authors *are*, a reading that sees texts not as ways to describe the world but as ways to construct it.

Let's return to JM's reading of the Warren letter: What did he need to know in order to see this letter as an appeal to the other colonies? To be sure, he needed to know the secondary literature of the Revolution—in fact, he quotes a monograph by Stanford historian Jack Rakove. But among the eight historians I studied, there were those who lacked such detailed knowledge, those who could not identify the Battle of Saratoga, virtual representation, the Townshend Acts, the Proclamation of 1763, and internal taxation—stock identification questions in a chapter review of a history textbook and part of a short quiz I gave to historians as part of the task.[10] Even among these "less knowledgeable" historians, we see the same general approach, if not the same specificity, in how they read documents. For example, FA, the medievalist, made this comment on Warren's letter:

> It's a way to try and get people in England to see things their way; it's encouraging loyalty to the king but it's saying the government has messed up. It clearly shows that the Regular troops are guilty of the violence at Lexington. . . . It's not just a recapitulation of events, but it in fact frames events in terms of. . . the relationship of the crown to its government, and these are two different things.

Despite his lack of factual knowledge (he answered only a third of the identification questions), FA's reading bears a strong likeness to that of his more knowledgeable colleagues. For FA, the document goes beyond a neutral description of events to "affect people's opinions," to reassure them that, despite the bloodshed at Lexington, the colonists still pledge "allegiance to the King."[11] In this reading, the letter "frames events" in terms of the relationship of the crown to its government, with the colonists pledging

[9]This aspect of text has been of particular interest to poststructuralists following the lead of Derrida. As Derrida notes, the text "constantly goes beyond this representation [the historian's representation of the text's 'proper' discourse] by the entire system of its resources and its own laws." Jacques Derrida, cited by David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *American Historical Review* 94 (June, 1989): 581–609.

[10]These identification questions were drawn from a leading U.S. history textbook: Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, Brace, & Jovanovich, 1982).

[11]These were FA's words in response to Warren's salutation of "Friends and Fellow Subjects."

loyalty to the former while indicting the policies of the latter. In other words, Warren's letter absolves the king by laying guilt at the feet of his appointees.

In both of these readings, the literal text is only the shell of the text comprehended by historians. Texts come not to convey information, to tell stories, or even to set the record straight. Instead, they are slippery, cagey, and protean, and reflect the uncertainty and disingenuity of the real world. Texts emerge as "speech acts,"[12] social interactions set down on paper that can be understood only by trying to reconstruct the social context in which they occurred. The comprehension of text reaches beyond words and phrases to embrace intention, motive, purpose, and plan—the same set of concepts we use to decipher human action.

The Reading of School Texts

The view of texts as speech acts may capture the primary sources I gave historians, but what about school texts? On the surface, such texts are worlds apart from the patently polemical documents reviewed by historians. It would seem that the school text, written so that students can read and retain the information it contains,[13] falls into a different category and would be less amenable to subtextual readings. To test this, I had historians read the following excerpt from an American history textbook:

> In April 1775, General Gage, the military governor of Massachusetts, sent out a body of troops to take possession of military stores at Concord, a short distance from Boston. At Lexington, a handful of "embattled farmers," who had been tipped off by Paul Revere, barred the way. The "rebels" were ordered to disperse. They stood their ground. The English fired a volley of shots that killed eight patriots. It was not long before the swift-riding Paul Revere spread the news of this new atrocity to the neighboring colonies. The patriots of all of New England, although still a handful, were not ready to fight the English. Even in faraway North Carolina, patriots organized to resist them.[14]

When asked to rank the relative trustworthiness of the eight documents, historians ranked this excerpt last, even less trustworthy than an excerpt from a fictional work, Howard Fast's *April Morning*. And for good reason, since the above passage contradicts primary accounts from both British and American sides, neither of which portrays the minutemen as "standing their

[12]John Searle, "What is a Speech Act?" in *Philosophy in America*, ed. M. Black (Ithaca: Cornell, 1965) 221–39.

[13]While the goal of text designer may be to write clear prose, the reality is often quite different. For a critique of history textbooks from the perspective of cognitive psychology, see Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Erika W. Gromoll, "Learning from Social Studies Texts," *Cognition and Instruction* 6, no. 2 (1989): 99–158.

[14]Samuel Steinberg, *The United States: A Story of a Free People*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1963), 92. Reprinted in Bennett, *What Happened*, 31.

ground" or "barring the way." But beyond noting the factual inconsistencies of this account, historians constructed elaborate subtexts of its latent meaning. This comment by FA was fairly representative: "[The excerpt] aggrandizes the heroism and resolve of the people who begin the war on our side. They are informed, they ride fast horses, and they stand their ground! They are not rebels because that's in quotes."

Students' responses followed a different course. I should begin by noting that these eight students comprised no ordinary group. They had mean SAT scores of 1227, well above the national average for college-bound seniors. Their GPAs were equally distinguished, with a mean of 3.5, and with two of eight students maintaining a perfect 4.0. Moreover, these students, when compared to their peers, knew a lot of history. All had taken four years of it and all scored significantly higher than a national sample on released items from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) examination in history.[15] In short, these students were the successes of our educational system.

The responses of Darrel,[16] an ambitious college-bound senior, are illuminating. Darrel maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA, scored 630 (verbal) and 690 (math) on his SAT, and was enrolled in Advanced Placement American History when I interviewed him. As I listened and later analyzed how Darrel read these documents, I was struck by how he embodies many of the features of the good comprehender described in the information processing literature—he carefully monitors his comprehension and uses debugging strategies such as backtracking when meaning breaks down; he pauses and formulates higher-order summaries after each paragraph; and he tries to connect the content of what he reads to what he already knows.[17] Nonetheless, Darrel rated the textbook as the *most* trustworthy of the eight documents he reviewed. Despite excellent generic reading skills and in-depth factual knowledge, Darrel believed that the textbook excerpt was "just reporting the facts—'The rebels were ordered to disperse. They stood their ground.' Just concise, journalistic in a way, just saying what happened." Nor was this response atypical. Like Darrel, another student characterized the textbook as "straight information," a neutral account of the events at Lexington Green. For such students, the textbook, not the eyewitness accounts, emerged as the primary source.

Overall, students had little problem formulating the main idea of these

[15]Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-year-olds Know? A Report of the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 267–69.

[16]All proper names are pseudonyms.

[17]Sometimes prior knowledge got in the way of Darrel's understanding of historical events. I explored the downside of prior knowledge in Samuel S. Wineburg, "Probing the Depths of Students' Historical Knowledge," *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association* (in press).

documents, predicting what might come next, locating information in the text, and answering literal and inferential questions about what the text was about. But when analyzing the above document, few students recognized that the labeling of the encounter at Lexington as an "atrocity" slants events and sets off associations of other "atrocities"—the Holocaust, My Lai, Kampuchea. None accounted for the quotation marks bracketing the word "rebels" or speculated about the author's intentions in putting them there. Students displayed little sensitivity to the contrast drawn between the "embattled farmers" and the troops of King George, a contrast that appeals to our natural tendency to side with the underdog. Unlike historians, no student commented on the progression in the description of the colonists, who go from "embattled farmers" to "rebels" and finally shed their quotation marks to emerge as "patriots." No student noticed how the text hedges on the firing of the first shot, yet is constructed so that a causal relationship is easily perceived between the statements "The 'rebels' stood their ground" and the "English fired a volley of shots." In sum, students failed to see text as a social instrument masterfully crafted to achieve a social end.

We should not be overly critical of students since these aspects of text, while central to the skilled reading of history, are rarely addressed in school curricula[18] or in the educational or psychological literature on reading comprehension.[19] For example, Collins and Smith, writing from an information-processing perspective, lay out a "Taxonomy of Comprehension Failures," cataloging the things that can go wrong during reading. They cite such problems as the failure to understand a word, the failure to understand a sentence, the failure to understand the relationship between sentences, and the failure to understand how the whole text fits together. But no mention is made of the failure to understand the intention of the author, the failure to grasp the polemic of the text, the failure to recognize the connotations (not just the denotations) of words, the failure to situate the text in a disciplinary matrix, or the failure to do a host of other things that loom large when reading historical texts. Similarly, these aspects are overlooked when researchers train their lens on comprehension monitoring. Because skilled comprehension is viewed as a relatively fluid and automatic process, comprehension monitoring is often seen in light of what might be called the "medical model of reading." In this model, comprehension monitoring is something readers do when they are in trouble or bogged down.

Palinscar and Brown, for example, see skilled reading as a relatively automatic process until "a triggering event alerts [readers] to a comprehension failure." At that point, expert readers must "slow down and allot extra processing to the problem area. They must employ debugging devices or active strategies that take time and effort."[20] But with texts that have larger rhetorical and social purposes, readers may also "slow down and allot extra processing" for reasons we have yet to understand. For instance, as historical texts become rich and conceptually complex, readers may slow down not because they fail to comprehend, but because the very act of comprehension demands that they stop to *talk* with their texts. This is the point behind Roland Barthes' distinction between "readerly" (*lisible*) and "writerly" (*scriptible*) texts.[21] Readerly texts are conventional documents that convey nonproblematic, straightforward messages, like how one changes the oil of a car or how a volcano spews forth lava. Such texts conform to ordinary expectations of meaning and are often processed passively and automatically. However, writerly texts, in the words of historian David Harlan (1989),

> challenge the conventions that isolate and identify meaning in the readerly text. In order to find meaning in the "writerly" text, the reader has to enter the text personally, has to participate actively in the fabrication of whatever meaning is to be carried away.[22]

How do skilled readers of history enter into the text to "participate actively in the fabrication of meaning"? How do they "write" texts while reading them? One way they do so is by simulating an interpsychic process intrapsychically—in plain English, they pretend to deliberate with others by talking to themselves.[23] Keen observers of the reading process have long noted this phenomenon. For example, in an ancient but prescient paper, Gibson[24] claimed that we read texts by simulating two readers, an "actual reader" and a "mock reader." The actual reader is an overall monitor of the meanings constructed during reading. But the mock reader is the reader who allows himself or herself to be taken in by rhetorical devices, to feel their effect, and to experience the associations triggered by crafted prose. When texts are straightforward and highly probative, the distance

[18]For an overview of typical history instruction as well as a description of exemplary history teaching, see Samuel S. Wineburg and Suzanne M. Wilson, "Subject Matter Knowledge in the Teaching of History," in *Advances in Research on Teacher Education,* volume 2, ed. Jere E. Brophy (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI, 1991), 303–45.

[19]William S. Hall, "Reading Comprehension," *American Psychologist* 44 (February 1989): 157–161.

[20]Alan Collins and Edward E. Smith, "Teaching the Process of Reading Comprehension," in *How and How Much Can Intelligence Be Increased,* eds. Douglas K. Detterman and Robert J. Sternberg (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1982), 173–85.

[21]Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974). Also see Barthes's provocative paper on the nature of historical texts entitled, "Historical Discourse," in *Introduction to Structuralism,* ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 145–155.

[22]Harlan, "Return of Literature," 597.

[23]See Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society,* eds. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman (Cambridge: Harvard, 1978).

[24]Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," *College English* 11 (February 1950): 265–69. See also Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Carbondale, Il.: Southern Illinois University, 1978), 131–75.

between the actual and the mock reader is minimal—indeed, there may be no distance at all. But with other texts, a chasm can form between the actual and mock reader and, when this distance becomes too great, the actual reader intercedes and says with finality, "Enough! This text is not to be believed."

The voices of actual and mock readers were audible in the protocols of historians, but other voices could be heard as well. The reading of history is complicated by the fact that historians are rarely the intended audience for the documents they review. As eavesdroppers on conversations between others, historians must try to understand both the intentions of authors and the reactions of audiences, all the while gauging their own reactions to this exchange. Indeed, sometimes the mock reader becomes a mock writer, joining in to rewrite a document with an author long departed. The example in Table 1 illustrates the dynamic interplay of this process.

Table 1 shows an excerpt from the protocol of TP, a specialist of 17th-century England who trained at the University of Wisconsin, reading Joseph Warren's cover letter to Benjamin Franklin. The first three lines (see Table 1) of the historian's protocol, a congeries of pronouns, convey the complexity of reading history: Who *are* all these people? The protocol begins with the historian as actual reader (line 1), acknowledging the fact that she has already commented on a particular aspect of the text. But in line 2 she quickly assumes the role of mock writer, co-constructing the text with Joseph Warren (as indicated by the use of "we" in line 2 and "us" in line 3) to address their joint audience—not as "them," but as "you," the inhabitants of Great Britain and, later, King George himself. Lines 4–7 further highlight the flow of communication between actual and mock reader. In line 4, the mock reader begins by laying bare the subtext of the sentence "hostilities are already commenced." Monitoring the mock reader, the actual reader offers a kind of clarifying "it's a way of telling" but then flips back to the voice of the mock reader—"*we* are loyal fellow subjects" (line 5–6). In the next section (lines 8–30), we find an explicit statement by the actual reader that she is constructing a message not found in the manifest text. Here again "you" refers to the mock audience, for whom the historian (taking on the voice of Joseph Warren) provides a running subtextual commentary. In lines 31–39, the historian summarizes what she has read ("they are not described as . . ."), but adds a few interpretive markers such as "so-called" (line 31). In the final comment of this section (line 39), TP turns from a review of the text to a summary of the subtext, again taking the voice of the mock reader: "*We* are as innocent as lambs."

In this excerpt, reading simulates the give and take of social exchange. First we hear the voice of Joseph Warren enunciating the real message behind his stilted prose. Next there is "you," the citizens of Great Britain or King George himself. Then there is "we," a reference to the historian as mock writer who co-constructs the text with Joseph Warren. Finally,

Table 1
Excerpts from TP's Reading of Joseph Warren's Cover Letter

Text	Protocol
Friends and fellow subjects:	1. Again, I think I dealt with the rhetoric there, 2. you know, we know that once you know the 3. true story, you will sympathize with us.
hostilities are already commenced in the colony by the troops under the command of General Gage,	4. I mean here is who really started the hostilities. 5. It's a way of telling, you know, we are loyal 6. fellow subjects but, you know, look what's 7. happened under this ministry.
and it being of the greatest importance that an early, true, and authentic account of this inhuman proceeding should be known to you,	8. Again, between the lines one reads, either 9. you're not getting any account at all, you 10. know, the news is being withheld [unclear], 11. or you're not getting a true account, or 12. you're not getting an authentic account, and 13. right away I'm going to tell you that it's an 14. "inhuman proceeding." Presumably, 15. again the rhetoric of it is that if you 16. knew about it and you may not know about 17. it because you have not gotten a true, authentic 18. account. You would see how inhuman this 19. was, and again you would be on their 20. [side], the presumption is that you're an ally 21. and that we have indeed a common enemy, 22. the common enemy being the minister who 23. may not have given you a true and authentic 24. account and tried to withhold this 25. information from you or may have tried at 26. least to put the information in such a way 27. that you are not aware of how inhuman this 28. proceeding was. Again, 'alarming 29. occasion,' again this sense of urgency is 30. being emphasized here
By the clearest depositions relative to this transaction, it will appear that on the night preceding the nineteenth of April instant, ... the Town of Lexington . . . was alarmed, and a company of the inhabitants mustered on the occasion; that the Regular troops, on their way to Concord, marched into the said town of Lexington, and the said company, on their approach, began to disperse;	31. And there again, the inhabitants, so-called, 32. you know, have done absolutely nothing in 33. this account to call down any kind of military 34. action. They're just inhabitants, they're not 35. described as armed, they're not described as 36. military, they're not described as having done 37. anything provocative and immediately, as they 38. see the Regulars, they begin to disperse. In 39. other words, we are as innocent as lambs.
These, brethren, are marks of ministerial vengeance against this colony,	40. "Vengeance" is very strong of a word, typical 41. kind of overlay.
for refusing, with her sister colonies,	42. Note "we're not alone in this fellows" [laughter]
a submission to slavery. But	43. A pregnant 'but" . . . you still have 44. time to intervene, we're still loyal, but we're 45. hard pressed. We still use the 'Royal 46. Sovereign,' we are still fellow subjects of the King.

there is the "I" of the actual reader, who acts as stage director for this cast of mental characters, dictating their lines, monitoring what they say, and ultimately noting the breach between her own understanding and the claims made by the mock reader. And it is this "I" who ultimately breaks down in laughter at the disparity between her own thoughts and those of the characters she has created.

The two-dimensional quality of written words fails to capture the elements of burlesque that characterize this reading. This is a ludic reading that jokes and jibes, that dons voices of mock-heroism and mock-tragedy and that ultimately degenerates into laughter when the actual and mock reader become so estranged they barely recognize each other. Indeed, the historian's laughter in line 42 hints at this breach. The mock reader turns into an object of ridicule who enunciates her lines in overdramatic parody.

Here reading moves beyond an author-reader dialogue to embrace a set of conversations—exchanges between actual and mock reader, between mock writer and mock audience, between mock reader and mock audience, and between any one of these characters and the "I" of the actual reader. Instead of a single "executive" directing a top-down process, mature readers of history may create inside their own heads an "executive board," where members clamor, shout, and wrangle over controversial points.[25] Texts are not processed as much as they are resurrected, and the image of reader as information processor or computing device, which often dominates current discussions of reading, seems less apt than another metaphor: the reader as necromancer.

To illustrate how readers reconstructed authors from their textual remainders,[26] let me describe another one of the sources I used, a diary entry by Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College in 1775. Stiles not only wrote about his life as a college administrator but described in great detail the unfolding events of his day. His entry about Lexington began: "Major Pitcairn [the British commander] who was a good man in a bad cause, insisted upon it to the day of his death, that the colonists fired first. . . . *He expressly says he did not see who fired first*; and yet believed the peasants began."[27] At this point, MB, a specialist in Japanese history, commented:

> Ezra Stiles for all his supposed democracy comes across as very kind of classist in a way. I mean, you can tell that Pitcairn is from the same class as Stiles. Maybe not, but they both are men of integrity because of their upbringing, so he's "a good man in a bad cause." And I get that sense from some of the terms that Stiles uses—I don't know what Stiles's background is but I assume he's not aristocratic but he's educated, probably a man of the cloth if he was president of Yale in the late 18th-century; at that point probably most of them were clergy. So he was educated even if not a noble. But Pitcairn probably was, because until World War II, I believe, most British commanders were, or its officers were, from nobility of some sort.[28]

In MB's reading, Ezra Stiles is a "classist" (based on his haughty tone and his use of "peasants"), a cleric (based on textual cues and her background knowledge), well-educated but probably not a member of the aristocracy, and a hypocrite (based on the discrepancy between Stiles's patriotism and his reference to his compatriots as "peasants"). While elsewhere MB talks about Stiles's motivations for writing, her comments here are not about the author's intentions but about the man himself. Similarly, when CT, an expert on Portuguese colonization in the New World, read Stiles's entry, he deepened his voice and dangled his pencil from his mouth, as if it were a pipe:

> I'm thinking [voice deepens]: a nice Yale man trying to say something, you know, [voice deepens again] "Major Pitcairn was a veeeeery good man." I'm just thinking that this is the voice of reason, Ivy League high Episcopalian orthodoxy. . . . "Peasants"—it's just a great word . . . I mean here we are reading about the American Revolution. After all, it's supposed to be a bunch of yeoman farmers vigorously defending their rights and here is the President of Yale. . .whose ancestors came from England and who made enough money to send him to Yale and get him to be president of Yale. . . . This is the elite talking about the peasant.[29]

In both of these readings, texts are not lifeless strings of facts, but the keys to unlocking the character of human beings, people with likes and dislikes, biases and foibles, airs and convictions. Words have texture and shape, and it is their almost tactile quality that lets readers sculpt images of the authors who use them. These images are then interrogated, mocked, congratulated, or dismissed, depending on the context of the reading and disposition of the reader. In such readings, authors, as well as texts, are decoded.

But the converse is also true, for just as readers decode authors so texts decode readers. Because texts present plays of potentialities, not sets of meanings forever fixed, the think-aloud protocols I obtained may tell us

[25]This point is from Alan H. Schoenfeld, who recognized a similar phenomenon in his work with expert mathematicians. See his *Mathematical Problem Solving* (Orlando, Fl.: Academic, 1985), 140–41.

[26]Dominick LaCapra says that historians "enter into a 'conversational' exchange with the past" and engage in "a dialogue with the dead who are reconstituted through their 'textualized' remainders." See his *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1985). This quotation appears on p. 37.

[27]F.B. Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diaries of Ezra Stiles* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1901.).

[28]This quotation has been edited slightly for readability.

[29]CT was interviewed during the pilot phase of this research and is not one of the eight historians referred to earlier. I thank David Madsen for pointing out CT's error: Ezra Stiles and Yale were Congregationalist, not Episcopalian.

more about those who read these texts than those who wrote them.[30] In the above protocols, the word that riles historians is "peasants," a word that calls up images of class struggle between peasants and elites. Whatever Ezra Stiles writing in 1775 may have meant, in the minds of these two historians, educated at Harvard and Stanford in the later half of the twentieth century, Stiles's peasants become the peasants of Marx and Engles who join with the urban proletariat to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Yet, when we look at the historical uses of *peasant* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find that *peasant* can simply mean "one who works on the land, either as small farmer or as laborer. . . one who relies for his subsistence mainly on the produce of his own labor and that of his household." So what did Ezra Stiles mean?

It is no doubt problematic to attach the connotations of *peasant* found in *Das Capital*, written in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to Ezra Stiles's entry of 1775. In fact, one could cogently argue that these two historians have got it wrong: Stiles was not making a distinction between rich and poor, privileged and downtrodden, peasant and elite, but simply noting a difference between urban and rural, between those who, like himself, earned their bread by administering a college and those who earned it by the sweat of their brow. Alas, were the problem only that simple: The *Oxford English Dictionary* enumerates other ways in which *peasant* was used prior to and contemporary with Stiles's entry. As early as 1550, the word had taken on pejorative connotations, implying ignorance, stupidity, and boorishness, modified by adjectives like "buzzardly" and placed in apposition to "coward" and "rascal." So the question remains: Did Stiles think of these men as farmers, nothing more? Or did he think of them as ignoramuses, men who shared little in common with the honorable Major Pitcairn, who was, after all, a "good man in a bad cause"?

To solve this dilemma, some historians would recommend that we shed our presentist conceptions, immerse ourselves in the langauge of the past, feel what past actors felt, and understand the connotations that they, not we, attach to words. Only by renouncing our own condition can we come to know the past on its own terms. Historians have sometimes gone to great lengths to do this, such as efforts of Robert E. Lee's biographer, Douglas Freeman, who tried to reconstruct what Lee thought by limiting himself only to what Lee knew, and then writing a biography within these boundaries of knowledge and ignorance.[31]

[30]For a related point made in a different context, see Margaret S. Steffensen, Chitra Joag-Dev, and Richard C. Anderson, "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Reading Comprehension," *Reading Research Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1979): 10–29.

[31]See the discussion of Freeman in Commager's *The Nature and Study of History*. Commager summed up his views on the futility of Freeman's approach this way: "There are many things to be said for accepting our limitations and looking at the past through the eyes of the present, but this is the most persuasive: no matter how hard we try, that is what we do anyway." (p. 59).

But the notion that we can strip ourselves of what we know, that we can stop the psychological spread of activation set off when we read certain words, recalls Alan Megill's notion of hermeneutic naiveté, or the belief in "immaculate perception."[32] Among postmodernists, Hans-Georg Gadamer has been the most instructive about the problems this position entails. How can we overcome our preconceptions, Gadamer asks, when it is these preconceptions that permit understanding in the first place?[33] No less than the people we study, we, too, are historical beings. Trying to shed what we know in order to glimpse the real past is like trying to examine microbes with the naked eye: the very instruments we abandon are the ones that enable us to see. No doubt our understanding is enriched when we learn that *peasant* has multiple meanings, but this knowledge does not close the question of "what did Stiles mean?" but simply widens it more. This is why the image of the author constructed in readers' minds remains just that—an image—which, in Carl Becker's words, is always shaped by,

> our present purposes, desires, prepossessions, and prejudices, all of which enter into the process of knowing. . . . The actual event contributes something to the imagined picture; but the mind that holds the imagined picture always contributes something too.[34]

An Epistemology of Text

When we compare how historians and students read these documents we see dramatic differences on practically any criteria we select. By itself, this news should shock no one; after all, historians know much more history. But on closer examination, this answer tells us precious little; we simply substitute ascription for explanation when we say that historians "did better" because they are historians. What does it mean to "know more history"? What exactly is transferred when a labor historian of the twentieth century or a medievalist who specializes in Islamic texts of the thirteenth century sits down to read about the American Revolution?

One might suppose that dramatic differences in topical knowledge separated these two groups, particularly if we define such knowledge as the names, dates, and concepts of the American Revolution that often appear in history tests. In point of fact, two high school students knew more of the identification questions (e.g., "What was Fort Ticonderoga?" "Who

[32]Allan Megill, "Recounting the Past: 'Description,' Explanation, and Narrative in Historiography," *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989): 632.

[33]See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretative Social Science*, eds. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California, 1979). For a constrast to Gadamer's position, one that tries to save authorial intent from the clutches of postmodernism, see Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985).

[34]Carl L. Becker, "What Are Historical Facts?" In *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1959), 132.

was George Grenville?" What were the Townshend Acts?") than one of the historians, and another historian knew only one more answer than most students. But knowing history is more complicated than answering such short-answer questions. That students so rarely saw subtexts in what they read; that their understanding of point of view was limited to which "side" a document was on; that they rarely compared one account to another, searching instead for the right answer and becoming flustered in the face of contradictions—all hint at something far greater than knowing more names and dates.

The differences in each group's approach can be traced, I think, to sweeping beliefs about historical inquiry or what might be called an epistemology of text. For students, reading history was not a process of puzzling about authors' intentions or situating texts in a social world but of gathering information, with texts serving as bearers of information. How could such bright students be oblivious to the subtexts that jumped out at historians? The answer may lie in an aphorism of Tertullian, the second century church father whose first principle of Biblical exegesis was *credo ut intelligam* ("I believe in order to understand"). Before students can see subtexts, they must first believe they exist. In the absence of such beliefs, students simply overlooked or did not know how to seek out features designed to shape their perceptions or make them view events in a particular way. Students may have processed texts, but they failed to engage with them.

Such beliefs may help to explain differences in the use of the "sourcing heuristic," the practice of reading the source of the document before reading the actual text. Historians used this heuristic nearly all of the time (98%), while students used it less than a third (31%). For most students, the text's attribution carried no special weight; it was merely the final bit of information in a string of textual propositions. But to historians, a document's attribution was not the end of the document but its beginning; sources were viewed as people, not objects, as social exchanges, not sets of propositions. In this sense, the sourcing heuristic was simply the manifestation of a belief system in which texts were defined by their authors.

When texts are viewed as human creations, what is said becomes inseparable from who says it. But, for some students, authors and their accounts were only loosely connected. So, when one student initially read the excerpt from Howard Fast he knew something was wrong: "You can't really believe exactly what they're saying. It's going to be, the details are going to be off." But by the time this student reached the last document, his reservations about Fast had fallen by the wayside as elements from this source were clearly present in his understanding. An Americanist, on the other hand, paused when he encountered the claim that the colonists were drawn up in "regular order." Remembering that an earlier document described the battle formation, he flipped back to Howard Fast's excerpt

and then burst into laughter: "Oh, that's from Fast! Forget it! I can't hold on to Fast; I can't do that. But it's funny; it stuck in my mind." So here we see the opposite case: a detail is remembered but the historian cannot remember its source. Reunited with its author, the detail is rejected, for this historian knows that there are no free-floating details—only details tied to witnesses.

The metaphor of the courtroom may help us understand these differences. Historians worked through these documents as if they were prosecuting attorneys; they did not merely listen to testimony but actively drew it out by putting documents side by side, by locating discrepancies, and by actively questioning sources and delving into their conscious and unconscious motives. Students, on the other hand, were like jurors, patiently listening to testimony and questioning themselves about what they heard, but unable to question witnesses directly or subject them to cross-examination. For students, the locus of authority was in the text; for historians, it was in the questions they themselves formulated about the text.[35]

What accounts for the fact that a group of bright high school seniors displayed such a rudimentary sense of how to read a historical text? How could they know so much history, yet have so little sense of how to read it? These are not simple questions, and their answers lie beyond the scope of this article. But, at the very least, we can point to the types of texts students have read in their history classes. Textbooks dominate history classrooms and, as Peter Schrag has noted, history textbooks are often written "as if their authors did not exist at all, as if they were simply the instruments of a heavenly intelligence transcribing official truths.[36] Avon Crismore provided documentation of Schrag's claim. In a discourse analysis of history textbooks and academic and popular historical texts, she found that "metadiscourse," or indications of judgment, emphasis, and uncertainty, was used frequently in historical writing but appeared rarely in conventional textbooks. For example, historians rely on hedges to indicate the indeterminacy of history, using such devices as modals (*may, might*), certain verbs (*suggest, appear, seem*) and qualifers (*possibly, perhaps*) to convey the sense that historical certainty is elusive at best. But Crismore found that

[35]This metaphor comes from Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946). Collingwood (p. 249) noted, "As natural science finds its proper method when the scientist, in Bacon's metaphor, puts Nature to the question. . . so history finds its proper method when the historian puts his authorities in the witness-box, and by cross-questioning extorts from them information which in their original statements they have withheld, either because they did not wish to give it or because they did not possess it." Collingwood follows in the footsteps of Voltaire, who wrote that "when reading history, it is but the only business of a healthy mind to refute it" (*Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 2).

[36]Peter Schrag, "Voices in the Classroom: The Emasculated Voice of the Textbook," *Saturday Review*, 21 January 1967, 74. For a similar view of the history textbook, see Francis Fitzgerald, *America Revised* (New York: Vintage, 1980), especially pp. 149-218.

most textbooks abjured hedges, providing little indication that interpretation had anything to do with the words on the page. Such writing may contribute to students' inability to move beyond the literal: "What happens to critical reading (learning to evaluate and make judgments about truth conditions) when hedges. . . are absent? When bias is not overt (as it is *not* in most textbooks) are young readers being deceived?"[37]

Perhaps Crismore overstates her case. Perhaps both her findings and mine are little cause for alarm; perhaps students' naive beliefs about text will simply be sloughed off when they get to college. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. For example, James Lorence, in observations of college freshman, found beliefs similar to those described here. Many students, he wrote, "expect a document to reveal something which they may regard as 'the truth'. . . . They persist in seeking a definitive conclusion on the reliability of the source before them."[38]Similarly, Robert Berkhofer, a historian at the University of Michigan, has written about "historical fundamentalism," a belief he encounters frequently among undergraduates, who "treat their assigned readings and textbooks, if not their teachers, as divinely inspired.[39] At Carnegie Mellon University, researchers Christina Haas and Linda Flower had undergraduates think aloud as they read a series of polemical texts. These researchers found that college students could easily decipher the basic meaning of texts and formulate the gist of what they read. However,

> these same students often frustrate us, as they paraphrase rather than analyze, summarize rather than criticize texts. . . . We might hypothesize that the problem students have with critical reading of difficult texts is less the representations they *are* constructing than those they *fail to construct*. Their representations of text are closely tied to content: they read for information. Our students may believe that if they understand all the words and can paraphrase the propositional content of the text they have successfully read it.[40]

Indeed, students may not be the only ones who embrace these beliefs; sometimes they share them with their teachers. In a study of knowledge growth among high school social studies teachers, Suzanne Wilson and I interviewed one teacher who told us that interpretation had little role to

[37]Avon Crismore, "The Rhetoric of Textbooks: Metadiscourse," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 16 (July–September 1984): 295.

[38]James L. Lorence, "The Critical Analysis of Documentary Evidence: Basic Skills in the History Classroom," *History Teaching* 8, no. 2 (1983): 78.

[39]See Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "Demystifying Historical Authority: Critical Textual Analysis in the Classroom," *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association*, 26 February 1988, 13–16.

[40]Christina Haas and Linda Flower, "Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning," *College Composition and Communication* 39 (May 1988): 30–47.

play in historical understanding: "History is the basic facts of what happened. What *did* happen. You don't ask how it happened. You just ask, 'What are the events?'"[41] Further evidence comes from a group of social studies teachers who participated in the field test of a performanced-based assessment conducted at Stanford University in 1988.[42] In one exercise, teachers reviewed an excerpt from an 11th-grade history textbook and evaluated it on the basis of its historical soundness and pedagogical usefulness. Typical of questions we asked was one in which teachers reviewed the textbook's explanation of Pontiac's Rebellion, in which the authors claimed that the vanquished leader was offered "generous peace terms." While the majority of the teachers had no trouble determining the book's point of view, several commented that this particular passage was "balanced" and "objective."[43] In sum, we can locate entire epochs of history—the Middle Ages for one—when pre-critical notions of historiography were embraced by adolescent and adult alike.[44] The notion that such beliefs are naturally abandoned as students enter adulthood has neither data nor history on its side.

From Ways of Reading to Ways of Knowing

In our zeal to arrive at overarching models of reading, we often ignore qualities of the text that give it shape and meaning. When historical texts make the journey from the discipline to the school curriculum, we force them to check their distinctiveness at the door.[45] The historical text becomes the school text, and soon bears a greater resemblance to other

[41]Suzanne M. Wilson and Samuel S. Wineburg, "Peering at History through Different Lenses: The Role of Disciplinary Perspectives in Teaching History," *Teachers College Record* 89 (Summer 1988): 529.

[42]Lee S. Shulman, "A Union of Insufficiencies: Strategies for Teacher Assessment in a Period of Educational Reform," *Educational Leadership* 38 (November 1988): 36–41.

[43]For information about this exercise, see Samuel S. Wineburg and Deborah Kerdeman, "H7: Textbook Analysis (History)," Technical Report of the Teacher Assessment Project, Stanford University, 1989. See also Suzanne M. Wilson and Samuel S. Wineburg, "Using Performance-Based Exercises to Assess the Pedagogical Content Knowledge of History Teachers," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 1991.

[44]See the chapter on "The Rationality of History," in Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1990).

[45]See, for example, a column on "teaching with documents" in *Social Education*. In a recent column, the authors reprinted a policy statement on the recruitment of nurses during the Civil War. The document included the statement, "Matronly persons of experience, good conduct or superior education and serious disposition, will always have a preference. Habits of neatness, sobriety, and industry are prerequisites." In their section on teaching activities, the authors make no reference to the subtext of this document and how students could be taught to decipher it. Instead, such activities as the following are recommended: "Ask your students to discuss what qualifications are necessary for a nurse today" or "Ask students to locate evidence to support or disprove the following: The Civil War was the bloodiest war in American history." See Wynell Burroughs, Jean Mueller, and Jean Preer, "Teaching with Documents: Surgeon General's Office," *Social Education* 66 (January 1988): 66–68.

school texts—those in biology, language arts, and other subjects—than to its rightful disciplinary referent.[46] So, for example, perhaps the defining feature of historical discourse—its constant reference to the documentary record through footnotes—is the very aspect that drops out when historical texts become history textbooks. No wonder many students come to see history as a closed story when we suppress the evidence of how that story was pieced together.

More broadly, the epistemological distinctions that first gave rise to the labels *history, physics, literature,* and *mathematics* often become eclipsed in the school. Although we carve up the school day into separate periods, hoping thereby to teach students to be polyglot in multiple ways of knowing, we too often end up teaching a single tongue. While students learn different vocabularies in different classes—*mitosis* in biology, *theme* in English, *Declaratory Acts* in history, and *function* in mathematics—these lexical distinctions share a common deep structure: knowledge is detached from experience, it is certain and comes shorn of hedge and qualification, its source is textbooks and teachers, and it can be measured with tests that have a single right answer.[47]

Ironically, this process of disciplinary homogenization is evident even in textbooks used in teacher education. So, for example, one popular reading textbook tells prospective teachers that, when reading historical documents, "students need to be guided to reading strategies for recognizing the uses of documents and for learning how to read them."[48] But rather than delineating such strategies or describing what historians do, the book directs readers to the chapter on "Reading in Science." But approaches to "reading in the content areas" that equate reading about the structure of DNA to reading about the structure of the American Revolution obscure the underlying assumptions that give texts meaning. Even the increased emphasis on domain-specific knowledge may have unwittingly contributed to this confusion by equating knowledge with information[49]—knowledge itself becomes generic, classified according to the number of facts and relationships represented in a semantic net or "if/then" conditions formalized in a production system. But domains, as Louis O. Mink reminded us, go beyond compilations of facts and concepts or executions of productions. They constitute "unique and irreducible modes of comprehending the

[46] John Seely Brown, Alan Collins, and Paul Duguid, "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning," *Educational Researcher* 18 (1989): 32–42

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] H. Alan Robinson, *Teaching Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies: The Content Areas* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1983), 181.

[49] See Gregory G. Colomb, "Cultural Literacy and the Theory of Meaning: Or, What Educational Theorists Need to Know about How We Read," *New Literary History* 20 (Winter 1988): 411–450.

world,"[50] sweeping ways of organizing experience and conducting inquiry into who we are. Thus, the topic of Western mountain ranges means one thing to a geologist, another to a historian, and still another to Ansel Adams. Reading is not merely a way to learn new information but becomes a way to engage in new kinds of thinking.

Why does the image of reading comprehension presented here differ somewhat from images that often emerge from the information processing literature? First, each image has a different starting point. Most of our portraits of the good comprehender come from school children, naive readers not yet socialized into disciplinary ways of knowing. The essence of reading comprehension becomes whatever it takes to do well on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, the Nelsen-Denny, the Gates-MacGinite, or any of a host of standardized reading measures. But these tests, all of which bear a strong family resemblance, are poor approximations of the slippery and indeterminate texts we encounter in the real world. Reading comprehension becomes what the reading comprehension tests measure—the ability to do well on specially designed passages written by absentee authors, each passage self-contained and decontextualized from the discipline that gives it meaning; the ability to respond correctly to multiple-choice questions that presume an unambiguous right answer; the familiarity with formats that disguise the fact that texts are written by human beings whose beliefs ineluctably creep into their prose; the skill at decoding literal as opposed to latent meaning; and the ability to process independent passages rather than creating intertextual connections across multiple texts. In short, reading comprehension becomes defined by the texts, by the readers, and by the measures we use to study it.[51]

When we abandon the controlled vocabulary of the comprehension passage and look not at school children but at people who read for a living, we end up with a different image of comprehension.[52] It is not that one of these images is right and the other wrong; clearly, each tells us different things about reading. But we do have a problem when there is a mismatch between the questions we ask and the image of reading we select.

[50] Louis O. Mink, "Modes of Comprehension and the Unity of Knowledge," in *Historical Understanding*, eds. Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob, and Richard T. Vann (Ithaca: Cornell, 1987), 36.

[51] Some of these criticisms of comprehension tests have been discussed by others. See, for example, Peter Winograd and Peter Johnston, "Considerations for Advancing the Teaching of Reading Comprehension," *Educational Psychologist* 22 (Summer and Fall, 1987): 219–20. For a fresh approach to comprehension, see Rand J. Spiro, Walter P. Vispoel, John G. Schmitz, Ala Samarapungavan, and A. E. Boerger, "Knowledge Acquisition for Application: Cognitive Flexibility and Transfer in Complex Content Domains," in *Executive Control Processes in Reading*, eds. Bruce K. Britton and Shawn W. Glynn (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum 1987), especially 184–93.

[52] If we looked at others who read for a living—literary critics, to name one group—we would probably arrive at still another image of comprehension.

ignorance, to the fact that we know little about changing students' beliefs about history.[62] Our efforts to do so, however, will surely founder if we wait until high school to teach students to ask one set of questions of a short story and another set of their history book; they must learn to ask such questions when they first encounter claims about the past. In fact, when we put our assumptions about children's capabilities to the test, we find that, under the right conditions, even third graders can grasp something of history's indeterminate nature to arrive at sophisticated interpretations of the past.[63]

Conclusion

Educational change has never come about by exhortation nor been sustained without deep knowledge of student learning. If history classrooms are to look different in the next century, the history curriculum must become more than a source of texts to use in studies of inserted headings or embedded questions. School history must move from a context variable, peripheral to the topic being investigated, to a site of inquiry in its own right, a place to explore the complex cognitive processes we use to discern pattern and significance in the past.

About 50 years ago, the eminent historian Carl Becker wrote a paper entitled "Everyman His Own Historian," in which he claimed that, like it or not, we are *all* historians.[64] What he meant was that we are all called on to engage in historical thinking—called on to see human motive in the texts we read; called on to mine truth from the quicksand of innuendo, half-truth, and falsehood that seeks to engulf us each day; called on to brave the fact that certainty, at least in understanding the social world, remains elusive and beyond our grasp. If Becker was right, then school history possesses great potential for teaching students to think and reason in sophisticated ways. Whether we exploit this potential, however, is another story.

[62]A recent task force of the American Historical Association reached the same conclusion: "Concerning the cognitive abilities of students of college age that equip them to learn history, our knowledge is meager. The task force urges that research on this topic be undertaken. The findings would contribute much to the rethinking of the history major and the manner in which history courses are taught," *Perspectives: Newsletter of the American Historical Association*, May/June, 1990, 18.

[63]See Suzanne M. Wilson, "Mastadons, Maps and Michigan: Exploring the Uncharted Territory of Elementary School Social Studies," *Elementary School Journal* (in press). See also Martin Booth, "Ages and Concepts: A Critique of the Piagetian Approach to History Teaching," in *The History Curriculum for Teachers*, ed. Christopher Portal (London: Falmer, 1987), 22–38.

[64]Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (January 1932): 221–236.

The view of text described here is not limited to history.[65] Language is not a garden tool for acting on inanimate objects but a medium for swaying minds and changing opinions, for rousing passions or allaying them. This is a crucial understanding for reading the newspaper, for listening to the radio, for evaluating campaign promises, or for making a decision to drink a Nutrasweet product based on research conducted by the Searle Company. If students never learn to see the difference between the "Contras" and the "freedom fighters," between "Star Wars" and the "Strategic Defense Initiative," between "terrorists" and "members of the PLO," if they think of these terms as neutral appellations rather than charged symbols tapping different meaning systems, they become easy marks for sellers of snake oil of all persuasions. We need to search our memories no farther than the recent presidential election in which "Willie Horton," a Black man convicted of raping a White woman, became a household term. That it took nearly five months for the subtext of this advertisement to become an issue of public debate is a more powerful indicator of national critical thinking than any NAEP item yet devised.

An ad for a new book on teaching thinking claims that we can do so with little effort—indeed, it claims we can "teach thinking skills across the curriculum without changing lesson plans."[66] I'm not so sure. If we want students to read historical texts differently from their driver's education manuals, if we want them to comprehend both text *and* subtext, I think we will have to change our lesson plans—not to mention our textbooks. If nothing else, we will have to reexamine our notions of what it means to acquire knowledge from text. The traditional view, in which knowledge goes from the page of the text to the head of the reader, is inadequate. But the metacognitive view, in which knowledge is constructed by students questioning themselves about a fixed and friendly text, is equally inadequate. We could do no better than to heed the words of Robert Scholes, who argues,

> If wisdom, or some less grandiose notion such as heightened awareness, is to be the end of our endeavors, we shall have to see it not as something transmitted from the text to the student but as something developed in the student by questioning the text.[67]

[65]As Charles Bazerman has argued, even such straightforward texts as research notes on the molecular structure of nucleic acids communicate beliefs about the status of knowledge and the role of the knower. See his artful reading of subtexts in "What Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 11 (1981): 361–387. See also Gay Gragson and Jack Selzer, "Fictionalizing the Readers of Scholarly Articles in Biology," *Written Communication* 7 (January 1990): 25–58.

[66]Iris M. Tiedt, Jo E. Carlson, Bert D. Howard, and Kathleen S. Oda Wantanable, *Teaching Thinking Skills in K-12 Classrooms* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1989).

[67]Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (New Haven: Yale, 1985), 14.