

**Panic Encyclopedia:**  
**The Definitive Guide to the Postmodern Scene**  
 by Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker and David Cook  
 CultureTexts Series. Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1989, 262 pp.

**Cultural Literacy:**  
**What Every American Needs to Know**  
 by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph Kett and James Trefil  
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, 251 pp.

There is no sushi in Kitchener-Waterloo. No arugula, which does not even appear in the salmagundi of salads displayed by *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. Not a whiff of durian. No chance to read my food in any except the most domestic ways ("home cooking"). Which is why I moved to Toronto where Joanne Kates, *Globe and Mail* food critic, has written and is continuing to write our gastronomic encyclopædia. Self-regard is rooted in breakfast (Donald Barthelme); an empty stomach is not a good political advisor (Einstein); the destiny of nations depends on how they nourish themselves (Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin). The last of the three maxims is from *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), itself a compendium of maxims; it's there that "you are what you eat" originated. Bulked from basic recipes, the book digests physiology, medicine, poetry, history and philosophy to give it an encyclopædic quality. Kates is Brillat-Savarin's legatee. Her authors, the only ones to survive in a post-Barthesian, post-Foucauldian era, are Jamie Kennedy, Susur Lee and Michael Stadlander, Toronto's *nouvelle cuisine* "artistes" whom Kates has canonised. Their art is the only one that's post-modern; it cannot be recycled in the marketplace for ever inflated values, swelled to the status of classicism by time and food crit. My sympathies on the side of the Van Gogh painting slasher, I can efface the traces on their plates, consume them crassly as calories. Try eating my words. Kates as codifier and connector is my arbitrary attribution though I prefer it to Frye and his great code! The only soul food I like was served at the Underground Railroad, a now defunct Toronto eatery.

Let's call encyclopædia-ism in the post-modern era palinodic. The etymology of "encyclopædia" is that of "circular education," though the editors of the *Random House Dictionary* augment circular by "well rounded" for fear (I impute such to them) of giving the sense of canceling or retracting knowledge. Pedagogy ("in every act of pedagogy there is an element of pederasty" — Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*), knowledge (-power) and in (-) formation are reconstituted and problematised in postmodern space giving encyclopædic formulation the stylised, dated air of *The Physiology of Taste* on contact with air (as in my hagiographical situating of Joanne Kates, who knows unerringly when something sits out too long). Brillat-Savarin's paens — he, too, knows his food — are to the perishable. In

## Panic

## Compendiums

Stan Fogel

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"Privations: An Historical Elegy," he writes, "First parents of the human race, whose feastings are historical, what did you not lose for a ruddy apple, and what would you not have given for a truffled turkey hen? But in your Earthly Paradise you had no cooks, no fine confectioners! I weep for you!" The refrain, "I weep for you," echoes throughout the piece: it is a lament for mythological and historical eras down to his own, still impoverished, period which is denied "delicacies born from the rocks, perchance, or liqueurs resulting from the pressure of a hundred different vapors; you will not see the things which travellers who are not yet even born will bring from that half of the globe which still waits for our discovery, our exploration. I weep for you!"

No fadism or *nouvelle cuisine* for E.D. Hirsch, certainly, who wishes a more substantial and enduring notion of encyclopædism than a palinodic or anti-positivistic perspective affords. Ditto for bombastic Allan Bloom and his disciples. Fed on fibrous stuff, not eating their own words, or "wallowing in their own mouths' wash," are these manly meat-and-potatoes men. It should be noted, though, in the *Encyclopédie*, the famous eighteenth-century French encyclopædia that was the work of Denis Diderot among others, there is a link between potatoes and flatulence: "But what is a little wind to the vigorous organs of the peasants and workers." Rarely, it seems, are the Bloomers downwind. Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, writes nostalgically of "the gripping inner life vouchsafed those who were nurtured by the Bible." Hirsch, in *Cultural Literacy*, bracingly offers cultural literacy as the way to thrive (his word) in the modern world: "Effective communication with strangers is altogether essential to promote the general welfare, and to insure domestic tranquillity.... Cultural literacy constitutes the only sure avenue of opportunity for disadvantaged children." Teleology not circularity for Hirsch and his nucleic knowledge. Virtual particles might someday be an entry in the fragments he shores against his culture's ruins, but never an attribute of them.

The authors of *Panic Encyclopedia*, too, appear unhappy with (panicky at) "the disappearance of the Real," the spate of simulacra, that feeling of being unfulfilled that marks postmodern insubstantiality (and the plates, Jamie Kennedy's creations, at Palmerston grump the all-you-can-eat set, all for compleat-ion). Their panic apocalypses, hyper-images clogging cyberspace, and Hirsch's, floating signifiers eluding the "Common Reader," might be compared with Brillat-Savarin's meditation, "The End of the World," in *The Physiology of Taste*: "the end of the world has already been predicted more than once, and even fixed on a certain date. I really feel ashamed about not telling my readers how I myself have decided this question; but I do not wish to deprive them of the pleasure of doing it for themselves. It can eliminate a few insomniac hours for them and even pave the way for some daytime siestas." Bravo, a theologically unencumbered last supper.

In Danilo Kís's short story "The Encyclopedia of the Dead," in the collection of the same name, a dream sequence houses a voluminous encyclopædia in the Royal Library in Stockholm. Its many volumes (this is a *New York Times Book Review* synopsis) contain complete biographies of everyone who ever lived. There is only one requirement for entry: nobody gets in who is featured in any other reference book. It is a memorial for those without memorials, a Warholian blurb for the blurbless, a contamination of the oft-cited such as Christ and Shakespeare whose fifteen minutes (*pace* Frye and Bloom) are up. A typical entry includes the ordinary details of a mundane life: vocations, illnesses, alliances, trysts, meals. As the *N.Y.T.B.R.* reviewer notes, there is, of course, an analogous project under way "out there": "the Genealogical Society of the Church of the Latter Day Saints" is attempting to compile and store an exhaustive genealogical reference book. The Mormons' undertaking (does their parody Kís's or is it vice versa?) is an elaborate attempt to sacralise their ancestors, to provide, in a cosmic or theological and obdurate sense of the word, an encyclopædic dimension to their history.

Kís's story, as do most postmodern destabilising encyclopædias, has Jorge Luis Borges instead of God in the margins of the text. From the big bang to black holes rather than more theologically or anthropologically resonant terms frames such ventures.

Borges is more of a panic, perhaps, than is Kís. His playfulness *vis-à-vis* the notion of encyclopædia in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is already a postmodern staple: contaminate fact with fiction. The *mise en abyme* of scholarship and its taxonomies, which purportedly "tame the wild profusion of things," is under way here. Encyclopædic lists, catalogues, scholarly disquisitions that embrace scientific, religious, mythical, geographical and historical references: these are a postmodern obsession. Here, for instance, is John Barth in *LETTERS* with an extended "entry" on marshes: "[marshes are] associated with both decay and fertility, female genitalia (cf. Freudians on Medusa), death and rebirth, miasma (pestilence, ague, rheumatism, sinusitis), evil, damnation, stagnation (e.g. Styx, Avernus also Ezekiel 47:11). Behemoth sleeps in cover of reeds (Job 40:11), Marsh ibis sacred to Thoth, inventor of writing." And on (in an extended way, always) goes this delineation of marshes with references to Alexander the Great, Maryland, Irish bog-peat and twelfth-century Chinese stories along the way. Self-consciously, Barth commandeers the role of the literary critic who might want to track down Barth's exploitation of the richness of "marshes" in *LETTERS*; Barth thus advances the notion that it is language's amplitude, not an originating author's purpose, that produces multi-layered meanings (and, concomitantly, encyclopædism). Using the paraphernalia of scholarship, Barth also challenges the boundary between the encyclopædic writer of fiction, whose breadth and erudition earn him/her the accolade, and the disinterested writer of encyclopædia.

The hyperthyroid novels of Barth, in their very gigantism, palinodically proffer and withhold the ascription encyclopædia. Barth mocks reliance on systems of knowledge by swelling those systems, their connectives and scope; however, he also displays an awesome, encyclopædic knowledge of various cultures.

The postmodernist scorn of, but also legerdemain with, well-rounded knowledge has both conservative and dispersive purposes. On the one hand, it is the old Eliotian carping about lack of a common culture; on the other, it is an attempt to disrupt the sense of commonality that has become rigidified, that hierarchises data and their organisation. It also undermines the people who produce, regulate and authenticate encyclopædias.

Such contradictoriness — making and unmaking — are too much, of course, for Hirsch the positivist, as he makes clear in *Cultural Literacy* and its companion volume, *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. In a quirky disavowal Hirsch writes about the group, of which he was a member, that compiled the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, "We are not encyclopedists; we want to

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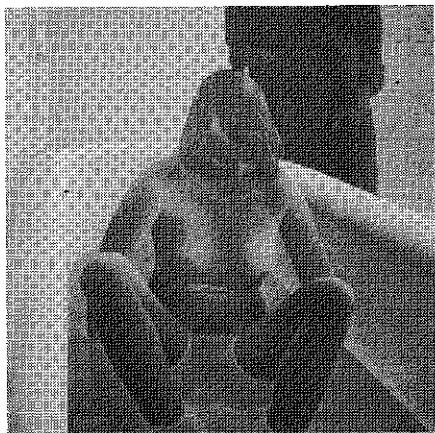
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Alex Colville's *Woman in Bathtub*, a representation of panic waiting. From *Panic Encyclopedia*.



reflect the culture." Sensitive to potential (and actual) charges that he is a shaper, a constructor, Hirsch must make cultural literacy, "the whole system of widely shared information and associations," something more than a contingent, authored entity.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard names two narratives of legitimation that have anchored knowledge. The first involves the state resorting to the narrative of freedom every time it assumes direct control over the training of the "people" under the name of the "nation," in order to point them down the path of progress. Hirsch's emphasis on the liberating potential, especially for "minorities," of his instrument of cultural literacy, comes out of this metanarrative as Lyotard calls it. The second narrative of legitimation incorporates a principle of universality (it's tied historically for Lyotard to the rise of the university) and unification. Hirsch's emphasis on the nation, national cultures and national literacy is delivered in a stentorian voice. Despite his patiently made qualifications, "*E Pluribus Unum*" resounds literally and figuratively in his text. The schools have an "historic mission" (Heidegger) in solidifying the nation. Hirsch's quixotic attempt to provide a core for national life is, of course, a runaway bestseller in the United States. It is so for the same reason Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* is: "out there" and even "in here" (the universities), acceleration, dispersion and anarchism are thought to be imminent and in need of rebuttal. Even if rebuttal produces the following "found poem" culled from the Appendix, "What Literate Americans Need to Know," to *Cultural Literacy*:

Never give a sucker an even break.  
 Never in the field of human conflict was  
 so much owed by so many to so few.  
 Never put off until tomorrow...  
 Never-Never Land.  
 Never over 'til it's over., It's  
 Never rains but it pours., It  
 Never say die.  
 Never too late to mend., It's.

*The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* is equally as arbitrary, a compendium of items that have been culled from history, geography mythology, literature, popular culture and science. It is to intellectual breadth what Esperanto is to a rich, diverse, "natural" language. What is poignant about Hirsch's venture is the rationale and desire that spurred him on his quest. *Cultural Literacy* articulates Hirsch's con-

cern about the decline he perceives in the literacy levels and knowledge levels of Americans. His sources for this are both anecdotal and statistical. The culprit in this decline is the usual canard — liberalised teaching theories and liberalised curricula. So Hirsch earnestly bundles out a "back-to-basics" message with the promise of shored up, modernised "basics."

The move from Hirsch to the Krokors and Cook is a move from Arnold's touchstones to Elvis's memorabilia, a move from lecture to performance. If Hirsch wishes to curtail the encyclopædia (it's not foundational enough) while at the same time advocating a well-rounded education, the Krokors and Cook wish to parody the encyclopædia, breezily yoking science and suburbs, de Tocqueville and doughnuts. Their *fin-de-millennium* effervescence, though, is in pursuit of a cautionary tale against the cultural gravitation pulling us (the centripetal movement and sucking sound as we go down the drain — circular education) "into the dark and dense vortex of the year 2000." Lyotard's postmodern delegitimising has become a maelstrom of panic, "a frenzied scene of post-facts," in the hands of the *Panic Encyclopedia's* authors.

Outrage spills onto the pages; images of disease, catastrophe, violence and excess abound; "the cultural immune system collapses." Each entry in *Panic Encyclopedia* is

an occasion for denunciation of a society speeding after illusory things, towards disintegration. Panic ads, America, suburbs, sex, T.V., jeans, architecture — these and other topics present platforms upon which to rail at panicked, postmodern culture. As if on Benzadrine, the contributors attack a culture operating as if it were collectively on Benzadrine. Still, *Panic Encyclopedia* is a kind of *tour de force*. After all, if Faye Dunaway's face can be the occasion for hectoring, one can be sure there will never be an entry called "Panic Silence."

E.D. Hirsch's *hoi polloi*, like, can't, it seems, communicate truly; the denizens of the Krokors' and Cook's world, in their words, "drink lite beer, have phone sex, smoke lite menthol cigarettes, eat imitation margarine, drink wine coolers, vacation at Disneyland, watch Bill Cosby, and have their panic fun." While outdoing Pynchon with their post-Heisenbergian scientific metaphors, the Kroker crew is (gasp) as elitist as Hirsch.

This is a revised version of a paper given in the Comparative Literature section of the Learned Societies, University of Laval, May 1989.

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