

ARTICLES

Reading Literature: Decline and Fall?

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Last year the National Endowment for the Arts released a report revealing a steep decline in the reading of literature in the United States. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, a segment of the “Survey of Public Participation in the Arts” conducted on over 17,000 people by the Bureau of the Census in 2002 for the NEA, found that for the first time in modern history less than half the adult population of the United States had read even a bit of poetry, fiction, or drama in an entire year. While in 1982, almost 57 percent of Americans were “literary readers”—those who read literature on their own, not for school or work—that percentage had shrunk to less than 47 percent in 2002. Due to the rise in U.S. population over the 20 years of the study, the actual *number* of readers has stayed flat at 96 million. If the *percentage* of readers had remained constant at the 1982 percentage, however, there would be 20 million more readers today.¹

No sooner had the report been released than observers began raising various qualifications and objections about its very notion of what makes a person a literary reader. I, for one, thought of a friend of mine who hardly ever touches imaginative literature but has memorized impressive quantities of poetry that he can recite whenever the spirit moves him. Is he outside the ranks of literary readers? Yet by the guidelines laid down in the report, he would be. Granted, that is not likely to be a common case, but more seriously, what about readers of high-quality nonfiction? A person ploughing through a multivolume biography of George Washington is no slouch as a reader and surely isn’t contributing to cultural decline. True, but imaginative literature possesses special transformative power. It involves us more deeply than any other type of literature can, lending shape, form, and order to our experience, and expanding our capacity to respond to life more fully. Art satisfies the natural human longing for completeness, for the need to ravel up the ragged sleeves of reality.

While some thought the survey’s definition of literature was too narrow, others thought it was too broad, including as it did anything from popular mass-market fiction to the classics, or, as NEA Research Director Mark Bauerlein explains, “any work of literature of any quality in any language in any print medium.” (“Reading a single poem in a magazine put one in the reader category,” Bauerlein offered. “Scanning a bit of ‘flash fiction’ on the Internet did

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too.”)² If mystery and romance reading is falling off, that is certainly no big loss, some might say. But since the study revealed a decline in every age group, for men and women, for whites, blacks, and Hispanics, and in every educational and income category, it is logical to assume a drop in the percentage not only of escapists but also of the more serious readers that will concern us in this essay.

Moreover, the decline in literary reading is accelerating. In 1982 the percentage of readers stood at 56.9, in 1992 at 54.0, barely a 3 percent falloff in ten years. But the 46.7 percent figure for 2002 represents a loss of over 7 percent since 1992. Will 2012 put the percentage at below 40 percent? As the report notes, we are rapidly losing part of our cultural legacy, and evidently all the book clubs and reading circles and public service literacy campaigns and even Oprah herself are failing to check that loss.

This matters all the more because the study found that literary reading correlates with a number of other activities in the public sphere, such as museum and concert-going, attendance at sports events, and volunteer work. Thus the decline has larger implications for the broad-based civic and cultural participation necessary in a democracy.

So, what has happened?

The report itself offers a couple of explanations. The rise of the Internet and other forms of electronic communication and entertainment is one. “In 1990,” we learn, “book buying constituted 5.7 percent of total recreation spending, while spending on audio, video, computers, and software was six percent. By 2002, electronic spending had soared to 24 percent, while spending on books declined slightly to 5.6 percent.” Since book buying remained largely the same, one might infer from this statistic that the growth of the electronic media cut into any potential growth in new readers.

Another explanation offered by the study rises from our changing demographics. The rapid increase over the past ten years in the Hispanic proportion of the population due to immigration and higher birth rates brought down the percentage of literary readers in the aggregate, since Hispanics have the lowest share of literary readers at 26 percent, down from 36 percent in 1982 and more than 20 points below the current national average. Hispanics have higher-than-average school dropout rates and higher rates of illegitimacy, a factor involved in low school performance. Disturbingly, these higher rates persist even in U.S.-born Hispanics of the first and second generations. And yet, something deeper must be afoot, because blacks also experience high rates of these problems and yet have a greater percentage of readers than Hispanics, 37.1 percent, down from 42.3 in 1982. The report recommends creating programs that target Hispanics in order to stimulate more interest in reading in that segment of the population, a wise idea.

A factor that the report does not mention may lie in the nature of contemporary literature itself. True, we can return again and again to the literature

of the past, of which there is more than enough to fill a lifetime, but readers long to experience a sense of their own moment as well. Contemporary fiction, however, is often juiceless, airless—highly polished and smoothly written, perhaps, but ultimately empty, lacking any wider reference to the human condition, let alone any sense of the transcendent. Saul Bellow spoke for many when he described the language he encountered in contemporary novels earlier in his career as “stingy and arid, . . . not connected with anything characteristic, permanent, durable, habitual in the writer’s outlook.”³ When writers do try to go beyond the flat, agnostic, minimalist tone and point of view typical today, they are often rebuked by critics who pounce on anything smacking of authorial presence and who insist that the reader must be allowed to “decide for himself” instead of being made to grapple with the artist’s vision.

As for poetry, when New England poet John Greenleaf Whittier published his book-length *Snowbound* after the Civil War, readers made it a bestseller. Its loving evocation of an earlier, more innocent America brought a much-needed sense of unity in the wake of that searing conflict, and nearly a century later even a staunchly traditional Southern writer such as Robert Penn Warren found himself an admirer and appreciator. But today, when the newest volume of the cryptic, disjointed effusion of subjectivity that constitutes contemporary poetry emerges, few people feel an urgency to buy.

Beyond all these factors we can surely cite the catastrophic deterioration in educational quality of recent decades. With all the increase in expenditures and expansion of access, the educational establishment has not only failed to create an intellectual bulwark against the encroachment of computers, video games, and DVDs, but has quite evidently contributed to the decline in reading. For, alarmingly, the sharpest drops in literary reading occurred among younger people, precisely those born between 1958 and 1984, those who would have come up in the radicalized, liberalized, “progressive” educational reformation that took off in the 1960s and grew to enormity in subsequent decades. In the 18–24 age range, the share of literary readers fell from nearly 60 percent in 1982 to barely 43 percent in 2002, that is, from 59.8 to 42.8. In the 24–34 age group, the percentage went from 62.1 to 47.7. In the 35–44 group, from 59.7 to 46.6. In contrast to these double-digit drops, the older age groups declined by much smaller percentages, ranging from about 2 to 4 percent.

How did our educational institutions play their part in this sorry picture? Let’s start at the top, with higher ed. At the New York Public Library event at which the NEA staff introduced the bad news in the spring of 2004, could one detect a somewhat embarrassed look on the face of former Modern Language Association president Catharine Stimpson? Well, she should be embarrassed. Stimpson and her fellow academic barbarians in the Modern Language Association have served as the shock troops of literary and cultural devolution, setting aside instruction in true literary appreciation for radical leftist propaganda concerning race, gender, and class; promulgating such worthless theo-

ries as deconstruction; and attacking literary and aesthetic standards, as well as the very idea of standards altogether. Is it any wonder that many college students of recent decades began to lose or failed to develop an appreciation for the specialness of the literary art?

Some years ago the MLA tried to pull the wool over everyone's eyes with a survey designed to prove that the politicization of the curriculum with "cutting edge" theories and works aimed at increasing the "representation" of supposedly excluded groups did not mean that traditional texts had been abandoned. In a careful and detailed analysis in *Academic Questions*, Will Morrissey, Norman Fruman, and Thomas Short showed how the survey, even though "designed to produce the most reassuring results possible," proved the opposite of what the MLA claimed. "Of course major texts are retained," the authors write,

but in drastically diminished numbers and in an order of relative imputed importance that has little if anything to do with their intrinsic merits or influence on subsequent literature. At the same time, students are being exposed, perhaps prematurely, to critical works written primarily for other professors, and these tend to advance an ideologically freighted reinterpretation of our literary past.⁴

What an irony that the professional class entrusted with safeguarding our cultural heritage and imparting it to young adults is the group most responsible for destroying it. In their comments on their vocation, contemporary tenured radicals can sound as if they were writing jokes for the Marx Brothers rather than professing literature. Let's not forget Stimpson's own now immortal dictum, that "defending objectivity and intellectual rigor . . . is a lot of mish-mash." And take Marilyn Mobley McKenzie, professor of English and African American Studies at George Mason University, who once ridiculed "the idea that if you talk about literature, you have to talk about Shakespeare or you haven't really talked about literature," and adds that "I got cured of that at Barnard."⁵ No doubt. And Gerald Graff, long-time champion of the new literary theories and professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, once opined in his book, *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992), that writing about television game show personality Vanna White's autobiography (with its "commodification of the self under postmodern capitalism") can be as valuable as writing about serious literature. Since, according to Graff, the whole idea of criticism is evidently not to uphold standards and explore literary depths but to look for "hidden meaning," why not look for "hidden meaning" in "a Harlequin [romance] or a clothing ad?" So for that matter, why not sell clothing instead of teaching English?

To get an idea of what it has been like for a bright young person to study in the remodeled literature departments of recent decades, we can turn to a first-person account from journalist Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute, who described her experience in an interview.⁶ Arriving as an under-

graduate at Yale in the 1970s, Mac Donald was excited to find deconstruction at its zenith, holding out what she thought were its possibilities for in depth study of language. She eventually found it to be a “fraud,” but not before “I wasted a huge portion of my time at Yale on something that was a fiction, a self-indulgent pastime of a few professors who had lost interest in conveying the beauties of literature.”

Deconstruction, Mac Donald reports, “proved to be complete bunk about language.” The

goal with every deconstructive reading was to show that the text broke down, it was unable to convey meaning, and it had the same rote, repetitious message. Whether it was Plato or Proust, a deconstructive reading arrives at the identical message for every text it looks at—that the human subject is just a play of language and that language ultimately fails. Such a view is nonsense and removes literature from its place in the world.

When she returned to Yale in 1980, thinking of starting a Ph.D., Mac Donald found that

[Paul] De Man and [Geoffrey] Hartman were repeating the same hackneyed formulas and bizarre worldview. . . . I realized that the four years I’d spent slogging through Heidegger and Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* was a complete waste. They purported to talk about language but they’d only developed their own bizarre discourse that illuminated nothing. Within a semester, I realized I couldn’t go forward with the degree in comparative literature. The field at the time was theory or nothing.

Fortunately, it was not a total loss. The formidable Mac Donald has put to use “the only thing good that I got out of it,” namely “the skill of close reading,” with which she dissects the “texts” of the liberal ideology governing our public institutions, as in her book, *The Burden of Bad Ideas* (2000). On the other hand, many of her classmates no doubt went on to become teachers of literature, and the teachers of the teachers of literature, in the 1980s and 1990s, in which capacity they joined the cohort of mis-educated English majors nationwide who helped usher along the decline in interest in the simple joy of reading that concerns us today. During these same years, many English and comparative literature departments were transformed into “cultural studies” centers. Morrissey, Fruman, and Short point to evidence of the “rapid, recent radicalization of graduate departments of literature” discernible in the MLA survey noted above. The percentage of respondents who were “concerned that their students understand the effect of race, class, and gender on literature,” for example, was 50.3 percent for those who had received the Ph.D. between 1947 and 1969, 63.9 for 1970–1979, and 72.2 for 1980–1990.⁷ What must it have been for 1990–2000?

Of course the lower educational establishment must also bear its share of responsibility. Young people who do not attain a solid level of literacy early in

life are unlikely to become avid readers later. To education observer Andrew Wolf, the NEA survey came as no surprise. Wolf writes mainly about New York but what he describes is hardly unique to that state, and he sees the decline in literary reading as coinciding “with the rise of the whole language (often labeled ‘balanced literacy’) method of teaching reading, and the associated content-poor progressive teaching model that encourages students to ‘construct’ their own knowledge.”⁸

In this method, promoted by “literacy gurus” such as Lucy Calkins of Columbia University Teachers College, Diane Snowball of New York University, and Lauren Resnick of the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Learning, “the role of the teacher as a conduit of knowledge has been subverted.” In some districts, it is now “unacceptable to have all the desks face the front of the room, the traditional classroom formation dismissively termed by those in charge as ‘Nazi rows.’” Use of the blackboard is discouraged and the teacher must be a “guide on the side,” not a “sage on the stage.”⁹

In addition, writes Wolf, the works of fiction in many classroom libraries today are “mostly carefully scrubbed and filtered, with content largely designed to build self-esteem rather than impart knowledge” or ignite in young people a lifelong love of reading.¹⁰ Viewers of the videos prepared by the Annenberg Project as models for classroom instruction can support Wolf’s contention. Students will spend valuable class time clustered in groups to discuss an undistinguished piece of writing designed to teach openness or some other trendy politically correct virtue, with the teacher moving from group to group to “facilitate” discussion.

Reading entire novels with a class has also petered out in some places. Now there is the “ten-minute mini-lesson,” promoted by Columbia University Teachers College, in which the instructor is required to use short pieces of literature with the whole class for only ten minutes. In some districts, teachers are issued stopwatches to observe the exact time. The rest of the period is set aside for students to read individually or to work in “book club” groups or “literature circles,” in which each group of randomly selected students (grouping by ability is strictly forbidden) reads a different “leveled” book, with the teacher dividing her time among them. A teacher friend of Wolf’s found that she could not adequately address the needs of her struggling students with this method and so decided to leave the school.

Lamentably, the New York State Department of Education underwrites these pedagogies, and has spent tens of millions of dollars enforcing them. The Reading First grant provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act have begun to demand a return to more traditional methods but there is a long, long way to go before the “progressives” are routed.

Another possible factor in the decline in literary reading was obliquely suggested by one of the study’s skeptics. Joseph Epstein pooh-poohed the importance of the NEA findings, claiming that they constituted only the latest *crise*

du jour,¹¹ but he himself had made an observation in an earlier essay relevant to our subject. Summing up his experiences at the end of his teaching career, Epstein noted a key change in his students over the years. Although he professed to see no more ignorance nowadays than in the past, he did see much less inclination to be embarrassed about it. When he began to give his classes quick “cultural literacy” quizzes, “What was sad was not the small number who knew [the answers] but the even smaller number who seemed to care.”¹²

Here is an important clue in our effort to understand the causes of the fall-off in reading literature, that is, that it is but one symptom among many of a larger decline, a decline in what it means to be an educated person altogether. The bourgeois ideal, of being cultivated, well-read, well-spoken, well-formed, that was once a standard for young people and adults, a remnant of the Victorian age but still operative through much of the last century, has gradually faded as a cultural model. Now, the very idea of exerting oneself to achieve some standard of cultural excellence has been replaced with fulfilling oneself and doing as one likes. The attack on standards and on the tradition turns out to be an attack on the cultural context in which the individual once located himself and against which he measured himself. Without that context, the only goal and guide becomes the self itself—self-realization, self-discovery, self-invention and reinvention.

Our “cultural legacy is disappearing,” the NEA report laments, “especially among young people.” But are our young people taught that they even have a cultural legacy, a literary heritage that is theirs to explore, cherish, master? Hardly. If they are taught anything about their background as Americans and as heirs of Western civilization, it is to be ashamed of it. Acquaintance with the literary heritage becomes less a legacy to be claimed than, at best, one of the many avenues of self-affirmation, therapy, or entertainment that have replaced traditional cultural identity and participation.

In some ways both sides of the political spectrum have contributed to this. The Left deliberately seeks to undermine our society with multiculturalism in which we must treat all cultures as equal in value if not superior to our own, and thus prevents us from instilling pride in our Western heritage.

Conservatives, by contrast, see America as great and unique, but, in a laudable effort to make the country as expansive and inclusive as possible, they often delineate its identity in purely liberal terms, that is, as the exemplar of the universal values of freedom, equality, tolerance, pluralism, openness, individual rights, and the rule of law. In so doing, conservatives undercut the content and specificity of the tradition that they in other instances seek to protect. What is unique about America if we are nothing but our ideals and our ideals are common to all humanity? We are universalizing ourselves out of existence, as I learned when I once asked a class for more examples of “meaningless words” as defined by George Orwell in his famous essay “Politics and the En-

glish Language.” The class response? America. Yes, America is a meaningless word, they said.

Ironically, while conservatives dogmatically assert that America consists of nothing but universally valid ideals, such universally valid ideals are not being taught either. On college campuses across the country anti-Semitic Muslim students call for an Islamic theocracy while we teach total evenhandedness among all cultures. And we are all familiar with those well-known studies that reveal woeful ignorance of American history and institutions on the part of young people. Some years ago a study found, for example, that almost 84 percent of high school seniors knew who Harriet Tubman was, but less than a third placed the Civil War in the correct half century.

Anecdotes can be even more effective than statistics in driving home the point because they more directly reflect everyday experience. A San Francisco reporter once did an informal survey of teenagers watching Fourth of July fireworks in a park and found that only half could name the country from which the United States had won its independence. (“Japan or something, China,” said one seventh grader. “Somewhere out there on the other side of the world.”)¹³ A columnist mentioned a young girl in his son’s class who thought that women had been drafted into the Vietnam War (and fervently declared that she would have refused to go).¹⁴ Why should she think otherwise, absent real education in history? But the larger point is, if America consists of its ideals, we should have been much more vigilant in seeing that those ideals and their historical context were being imparted to young people.

It wasn’t always this way. For the Canadian-born Saul Bellow, becoming an American started with the Chicago public school that he attended as a boy, which, needless to say, did not teach multiculturalism. Instead he and his classmates, sons and daughters of European immigrants, learned that “George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were *your* Presidents.” Furthermore, although we prate about “inclusion” in our schools, by which we mean affirming and celebrating superficial, sanitized versions of the foreign cultures from which many of our students come, Bellow and his classmates, who spoke a sort of street English and a *mélange* of European tongues, found that “You could not be excluded when the common language became your language. . . . At school, we, the sons and daughters of European immigrants, were taught to write grammatically. Knowing the rules filled you with pride.”

Moreover, Bellow’s becoming a writer—an American writer who went on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature—was not just about declaring ideals, but about absorbing culture, getting a feel for the fabric of life, a sense of the particularities of the world surrounding him, everything from current events to sports to high art. “I followed the Leopold and Loeb case in the papers,” he wrote years later. “In 1926, there was the Dempsey-Tunney fight, and Charlie Chaplin’s *Gold Rush*. By 1930, I was an American entirely. I read [H.L.

Mencken's] *The American Mercury*, the novels of Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson."¹⁵

This is the kind of appetite that we need to awaken in our young people, an excitement about the specific culture that has both formed them and is formed by them, that invites both their appreciation and their participation. Of course we want them to be open to other cultures as well, but to understand the very meaning of culture itself they must begin with their own, and must be allowed pride and affection for the tradition of which they are a part. The sterilized fragmentation of multicultural education cannot inspire love, and ultimately an attachment to literature is rooted in the heart.

It could be a moment in a play, a cadence of speech, a fragment of poetry, a memorable character, a feeling of joy in reading, that lights the spark. Critic Eric Ormsby was taken out of himself when he read some verses in Walter Scott's *Marmion* as a boy. Hardly great poetry but nevertheless, "[f]or weeks I perched on our balcony in the blazing sun and declaimed whole stanzas to indifferent mockingbirds," he remembers today. "I was drunk on the language which struck me then as valorous and charged in a way I couldn't comprehend."¹⁶ *AQ* contributor Leo Raditsa remembered the vivid sensation he experienced when his Harvard professor, the famous Dante scholar Charles Singleton, read from the *Divine Comedy* in his Tuscan accent. "Reading Dante was like eating bread," Raditsa recollected years later, "the unsalted bread of Tuscany, and you learned . . . that you had never really tasted bread before, nor experienced other everyday things. Dante's lesson also."¹⁷

Once, years ago, I went with my younger sister to see *King Lear* in New York City's Central Park, and I'll never forget her little gasp when the tormented Lear recognized the blinded Gloucester on the heath. "I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester," said the ravaged king in perfect sanity and composure, and the two broken, rejected men embraced. Lear's madness, the loyal Gloucester's blindness, blocked out none of the harsh and ugly nightmare they were separately enduring. They felt what they were going through, and were joined in suffering, and my sister, a young girl, felt and suffered along with them.

Such moments awaken what C.S. Lewis called the "sensation of desire," a longing for that something that transcends us, an almost physical hunger for the beauties of the imaginative world. They constitute also that "second life of art," of which Eugenio Montale wrote, that returns to us at odd moments when something of what we've read intrudes into our consciousness and expands the dimensions of our everyday life and experience.

Unfortunately, young Americans today are not encouraged to love their own, their tradition, their language, their literature, for fear that they will offend someone who does not "identify" with them. The individual is thrown back on himself to "create his own meaning." But without a tradition, a culture, what meaning is there? The world thus shrinks around the human being,

leaving only the poor, bare, unaccommodated self, analogous to those many contemporary films in which the characters are shown in oppressive, unrelied close-ups, not as human beings interacting with others in a larger space. Although reading is a solitary activity, it is also paradoxically a form of communication, for with it we leave our isolated individuality and enter the shared space of our culture. It is no coincidence that readers of literature also participate in yet other social and cultural activities. They have found one of the precious keys to being fully engaged, fully human, and fully alive.

Notes

1. Research Division Report #46, produced by Tom Bradshaw and Bonnie Nichols, Research Division, National Endowment for the Arts, June 2004.
2. *Reading at Risk: A Forum*, Mark Bauerlein editor, *Forum*, a publication of the ALSC, Spring 2005, 4.
3. "I Got a Scheme!" *New Yorker*, 25 April 2005, 76. This is part of a running correspondence that Bellow had in his later years with Phillip Roth.
4. "Ideology and Literary Studies, Part II: The MLA's Deceptive Survey," *Academic Questions* (Spring 1993), 51.
5. Quoted in Sophia N. Kellman, "To Be or Not to Be Loved," *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 24 May 2001.
6. lukeford.net/profiles/profiles/heather_macdonald.htm.
7. "Ideology and Literary Studies," 56.
8. "The Answer Goes Back to Basics," *New York Sun*, 7 August 2004.
9. "Shortcut Classics in City Schools," *New York Sun*, 10–12 June 2005.
10. "The Answer Goes Back to Basics."
11. "Is Reading Really at Risk?" *Weekly Standard*, 16–23 August 2005, 24–29.
12. "Goodbye, Mr. Chipstein," *Commentary* (February 2003), 40–45.
13. Cited in Anne Applebaum, "Give This 'Attic' a Story to Tell," *Washington Post*, 22 June 2005, A21.
14. David Gelernter, "We Are Our History—Don't Forget It," *Jewish World Review*, online, 17 June 2005.
15. "I Got a Scheme!" *New Yorker*, 25 April 2005, 75–76.
16. "Of Lapdogs and Loners: American Poetry Today," *New Criterion* (April 2004).
17. Leo Raditsa, "On Sustenance: Teaching and Learning the Great Works," *Academic Questions* (Spring 1989): 30.

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