


FORUM: A PUBLICATION OF THE ALSC

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 IN THIS SECOND ISSUE of *Forum*, members of the ALSC respond variously to *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, the study released by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2004. It is part of the mission of the ALSC to provide what our title announces, a forum for discussion of questions concerning the life of letters in our country and beyond. As an association, we have no unified policy or position on this report or on any other, but in creating space for debate, we try to draw attention to matters we consider important. We are committed, as well, to making connections between literary activity in school, from primary and secondary education through undergraduate and graduate study, and in the public sphere. The ALSC was founded, in part, to resist two unhealthy forces of separation: the increasing detachment of the professionalized study of literature, on the one hand, from the concerns of writers practicing the art, and, on the other, from the teaching of literature in school programs for the young. The report on *Reading at Risk* addresses both of these concerns as well as many others, and suggests that we cannot think of literature in only a specialized context. A consideration of reading in a society at large, and the raising of complex questions about the nature of “literature,” inevitably prompt reflection on the character of our schools, of our libraries, of family life as a structure for education and entertainment, of changing technologies for story-telling and enchantment, and of our culture generally conceived. In a round-up as brief as the one presented here, we can do no more than indicate some directions for further thought. But we hope to have done that, and to have focused attention on a variety of problems. How does a civilization define itself? How does it tell its stories, sing its songs, pass along its cherishings and its cautions? What is the relationship between the private life of the imagination, as nourished by literature, and the public life of culture? Is there a relation between the political health of a republic and the quality of the intellectual and artistic lives of its citizens?

We are grateful to Mark Bauerlein for having shaped this issue of *Forum* and for having assembled the divergent views here whose expression, we hope, will provoke more debate, and even more importantly, more projects to foster reading.

—Rosanna Warren

President, Association of Literary Scholars and Critics

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Forum: A Publication of the ALSC

Michael Valdez Moses, General Editor

Reading at Risk: A Forum

Mark Bauerlein, Editor



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READING AT RISK: A FORUM

Mark Bauerlein



MARK BAUERLEIN

National Endowment for the Arts

This issue of Forum gathers 12 brief responses to *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, a report by the National Endowment for the Arts on the place of literature in the lives of adult Americans. Most ALSC members will be familiar with the basic findings of the survey—it provoked some 600 news stories across the country after its release in July 2004—but the startling decline in literary reading bears repeating.

	<u>1982</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>2002</u>
% of adults reading literature	56.9	54	46.7

The 10-point drop represents a loss of 20 million potential readers. When one considers how easily a respondent qualified as a “literary reader,” the decline appears even more dramatic. Our primary questions were: “During the last 12 months, did you read any novels or short stories [or any poetry or any plays]?” Reading a single poem in a magazine put one in the reader category. Scanning a bit of “flash fiction” on the Internet did, too. The survey accepted any work of literature of any quality in any language in any print medium. What this means is that for more than half the adult population, literature has no real existence, and the portion is growing.

If we break the results down by different demographic categories, one particular group of special interest to humanities teachers in higher education showed the steepest declines of all: young adults.

	<u>1982</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>2002</u>
% of persons age 18-24 reading literature	59.8	53.3	42.8

The 17-point slide signifies a vast shift in youth culture. Young persons have gone from one of the most active reading groups to one of the least active. And teachers shouldn't expect the withdrawal of literature from young people's lives to cease any time soon. Research on the leisure preferences and media habits of young adults and teenagers shows that reading is a dwindling option. In September, the Bureau of Labor Statistics issued a Time Use survey that tracked activities through the day and night. In their leisure time 15-24-year-old males spend about 2 hours 20 minutes watching TV and 48 minutes playing games and using computers for fun. Their reading time: 8 minutes. Women spend less time on computers, but they, too, devote only 8 minutes a day to leisure reading (although they have about an hour less leisure time per day than young men do). Reading, here, it should be noted, included any kind of texts from newspapers to novels to the Bible, plus browsing in the library and listening to books on tape.

Young people declined the most, but other demographic groups underwent significant, and sometimes inexplicable, declines as well. African Americans rose 3 points from 1982 to 1992, but reversed course and fell 8 points from 1992 to 2002. People of every education level dropped, but college graduates did so at a faster rate than did those without a high school diploma. A gender gap in literary reading has existed for a long time, but from 1982 to 2002, it expanded considerably, with women falling 7.9 points and men falling 11.5 points. As Chairman Gioia notes in his preface, “The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture will study the pages of this report in vain.”

There are, to be sure, some limits to the survey. Because the Endowment focused on voluntary activities, it excluded reading required for work or school. No doubt, many young people currently attending school who do not read literature in their leisure time do read literature in class. In 1982, though, the same condition held and almost 60 percent of young adults read literature not assigned on a syllabus. Furthermore, the fact that in the 20 vacation weeks a year young people at a crucial period of emotional and intellectual development choose not to read a single poem, play, or narrative casts a doubtful light on how much inspiration they take in their humanities classes.

Certain forms of literary nonfiction were not counted in the questionnaire—historical narrative, literary essays, memoir, etc. But the Endowment did ask about overall book reading.

	<u>1982</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>2002</u>
% of adult Americans reading any book	—	60.9	56.6
% of 18-24-year-olds reading any book	—	59.3	51.0

For all adults, although the rate of decline for all books is only half that for fiction, poetry, and drama, the direction is the same. Moreover, among young people, the kinds of knowledge that should come with nonfiction reading haven’t materialized. Indeed, survey research into their cultural, historical, and civic awareness is distressing. The National Conference on State Legislatures conducted a 2003 survey of civic knowledge and concluded, “young people do not understand the ideals of citizenship, they are disengaged from the political process, they lack the knowledge necessary for effective self-government.” A 2002 National Geographic survey found that nearly 30 percent of Americans age 18-24 could not locate the Pacific Ocean on a map, and only 15 percent could find Afghanistan, Iraq, or Israel. On the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress exam in history, a full 57 percent of high school seniors scored “Below basic” (essentially, an “F”), and in 2002 only one in twenty seniors reached “Advanced” on the reading exam. In 1972, 46 percent of college-age Americans read a newspaper every day. Today, the rate is only 21 percent.

These findings won’t surprise those who have spent any time in an average college classroom. Professors have always griped about the lassitude of students, but lately the complaints have reached an extreme. English teachers note that it’s getting harder to assign a work over 200 long pages; students don’t possess the habit of concentration necessary to

plow through it. Teachers say that students don't comprehend spelling requirements; spelling is now the responsibility of spell-check. Last October at an MLA regional meeting, a panelist who specializes in technical writing observed that while his students have extraordinary computing skills, they have a hard time following step-by-step instructions for an assignment.

The digital/non-digital discrepancy is an important one, and professors aren't the only ones to notice it. In 2001 the National Association of Manufacturers asked its members to rank the problems they face in the workplace. They cited simple employment skills (attendance, cooperation) as number one, but in second place came reading and math skills. Not computer literacy, but basic reading comprehension. Manufacturers claimed that poor reading skills among the workforce make it difficult for them to raise productivity and keep pace with new technology. In December, the *New York Times* ran a story entitled "What Corporate America Can't Build: A Sentence" that reported that businesses spend approximately \$3.1 billion dollars a year on remedial writing for employees.

The testimony of employers and professors, as well as the fact that reading scores in K-12 education have remained flat for 20 years, indicates that more digital technology in the schools is not the answer. Not only are the logistics of implementing digital technology in the schools themselves an obstacle to better instruction, but the kinds of reading that take place on the Web do not inculcate the habits of concentration and analysis essential to the comprehension of difficult texts. In 1997, Sun Microsystems conducted a study in Web page design and on-line attention spans. The paper was entitled "How Users Read on the Web." Its first sentence: "They **don't**." Only 16 percent of subjects read linearly, word-by-word. The rest scanned the page, searching for visual clues and keywords. That kind of reading facilitates information processing, but it doesn't cultivate an eye for verbal detail and nuance. In sum, the Internet environment prizes speed over care.

This is not a definitive outcome, and how digital technology evolves in education remains to be seen. But it does cast doubt on the benefits of digital practice to deliberate reading. The etiology of lower reading rates and poor knowledge scores is infinitely complex, but clearly the Internet, videogames, Instant Messaging, etc., have contributed to the decline. Because of the verbal and imaginative demands of literature, literary reading is particularly endangered by digital practices. Information retrieval, Web surfing, email, and the like accelerate and instrumentalize verbal habits, and they are becoming the model of communication for young people. The dense verbal texture of poetry slows reading to a pace that they find discomfiting. The anti-conventions of modern and postmodern fiction only confuse and irritate those accustomed to the visual aides and flat expressions of the screen. And the mismatch emerges not only with high and *avant garde* literature. Even romance novels solicit an imagination of setting and identification with characters that many young persons, raised on Google, are too passive to complete. The literary reading experience requires immersion in the text, but the digital environment asks that readers scan it, skate across its surface.

Of those expected to defend literary values in a digital age, one would think humanities professors would lead the way. In fact, few have done so. Some professors are too busy with coursework and scholarship to register the decline of literature in society at large, while others hesitate to implement what might appear an ideological preference, an elitist taste, or an outmoded conservation. But the decline of literature has affected them, most directly in the erosion of literature departments by cultural studies, popular culture studies, film studies, and media and technology studies. Resources in the university have been shifted away from traditional literature departments and toward studies programs, leaving English and foreign language professors uncertain of their standing. The findings of *Reading at Risk* and other surveys of cultural behavior and knowledge should embolden them. The promise of the studies programs was that they would make students more informed about contemporary society, sharpen their critical thinking, deepen their historical understanding, enhance their progressive impulses, and prepare them for the Information Age. The promise is unfulfilled. The civic, cultural, and historical awareness of students has gone down, suggesting that the newer curricula do not produce active, knowledgeable, engaged citizens any better than does a traditional curriculum.

The other ground for defending literary values on campus needs no justification by outcomes. It is that our literary inheritance is a value in itself, and the humanities professor has a responsibility to it. Humanities professors are uniquely placed to preserve the heritage of literary expression from Homer onward, and they must realize that the survival of tradition is no longer a departmental concern or a canon question. It is a public concern. This issue of *Forum* is the first occasion for literary scholars and writers to address it collectively. It is my hope that it shall be disseminated widely, and that to the national discussion sparked by *Reading at Risk* it shall add the voice of those operating at the highest levels of literary reading.



MICHAEL VALDEZ MOSES

Duke University

The release of *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, a report by the National Endowment for the Arts, has given rise to vigorous public debate about the current state of literary culture in America. Dana Gioia, Chairman of the NEA, has termed the report “a bleak assessment of the decline of reading’s role in the nation’s culture.” He summarizes the report in a single sentence: “literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated especially among the young.” Gioia states that “for the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature.” According to the report, whereas 56.9% of the adult population read literature in 1982, only 46.7% read literature in 2002. (Reading literature is defined as having read at least one novel, short story, poem, or play in one’s leisure time—not for work or school—during a twelve month period). The absolute number of adults who read literature held constant over 20 years at 96 million, but only as a result of

the overall growth of the adult population. The report documents that literary reading rates declined for a wide range of demographic groups including men and women, people from all ethnic and racial groups, people with all levels of educational attainment, and those under age 45.

While a great many journalists have greeted *Reading at Risk* with a chorus of alarms, the report has also met with a skeptical reception even from some of the staunchest defenders of literary culture, such as the former editor of the *American Scholar*, Joseph Epstein. In a recent article entitled “Is Reading Really at Risk,” Epstein claims that two points of great importance about the NEA report “cripple its significance”: (1) “the quality of the reading being done is not taken into consideration” and (2) “neither has serious nonfiction been tabulated.” According to Epstein “more Tom Clancy than Ivan Turgenev is doubtless being registered. The thought that 96 million people in our happily philistine country are regularly reading literature, even though it might represent a decline over 20 years earlier, would still be impressive, except for the fact that we don’t know how many of them are reading, not to put too fine a point on it, crap.” He points out that “one could be reading a steady diet of St. Augustine, Samuel Johnson, and John Ruskin and fall outside the boundaries of what the report calls “literary readers.” “Given this exclusion,” Epstein notes, “who can be certain that, for example, George Kennan, Jacques Barzun, or the late J. Robert Oppenheimer would qualify as among the survey’s readers of literature?” Epstein concludes: “in a standard statistical report such as *Reading at Risk*, serious reading, always a minority interest, isn’t at stake.”

Both the NEA report and Epstein’s criticism of its shortcomings merit careful consideration. As a third generation Mexican-American, I am struck by the fact that the overall decline in literary reading among the adult American population is partly due to a recent and very sizable wave of immigration of Hispanic Americans who have the lowest levels of literary reading among any ethnic group. Given that first generation immigrants (especially those from non-English speaking countries) are quite rightly concerned first and foremost with supporting themselves and their families, rather than cultivating a refined literary sensibility (something their children and grandchildren may be better prepared and more inclined to pursue), the overall statistical decline in reading rates may not promise quite so bleak a future for American culture as the NEA report might seem to suggest. But the disproportionate impact of recent Hispanic immigration does not alone tell the whole story, for, as noted, reading rates have declined for every demographic group of adult Americans over the past twenty years. I am not at all encouraged by one particular finding of *Reading at Risk*: literary reading among those who have earned a college degree or attended graduate school declined from 82.1% in 1982 to 66.7% in 2002. (Nonetheless, the total number of literary readers in this demographic group actually increased from 23.5 to 35.6 million from 1982 to 2002). If Epstein is right that “reading has always been a minority matter,” then the sharp decline in the percentage of “literary” readers among a privileged (and sizable) minority who are ostensibly “well-educated” is a legitimate cause for worry.

I think Epstein is right to be concerned not only with the mere numbers and percentages of literary readers, which is all a governmental statistical report can provide, but also with the *quality* and *generic range* of works deemed worthy of serious attention and literary study. If in 2012, 60% of the total adult population were to have read the newest John Grisham or Stephen King novel, our contemporary literary “crisis” would be behind us, and Mistery Grisham and King would be on the cover of *Forbes*, but the country would not exactly be enjoying a literary renaissance. It is my conviction that no government agency, no matter how well intended, is the proper vehicle for resolving a “cultural crisis,” if only because the government-backed “cultural revolutions” of this century have proved such dismal and dangerous failures. To be fair, *Reading at Risk* does not call for a massive federal or governmental initiative to address the “crisis” in literary culture, though it would not be unprecedented for calls to action on the part of the government be made in the wake of such a report. Insofar as literary culture can or should be cultivated, the responsibility for this task properly falls to individual readers, students, teachers and professors, and to organizations such as the ALSC. Only with the latitude and liberty granted to *private* individuals and organizations can an unconstrained and necessary debate over the *quality* of what is read and valued be pursued with aesthetic discernment, critical intelligence, and moral honesty.

Epstein’s riposte ought to remind us that a primary function of criticism is *critical judgment*. It is a curious fact that teachers of literature in our colleges and universities have increasingly shied away from making critical judgments with respect to the quality of the works they read, teach, and interpret. (One of the newest “academic” initiatives in my own department is a graduate student reading group, supported in part by university funds, devoted to the study of comic books and graphic novels). I fear that public initiatives aiming to get more Americans to read “literature” will prove to be the flip-side of the easy conformity of reading habits that increasingly prevails in the academy, and that both will in the end prove to be the unfortunate by-products of an unqualified but otherwise admirable commitment to a democratic culture.

But if literary critics and the public at large are increasingly reluctant to engage in a sustained debate over what makes for a good or a bad, as opposed to a merely popular or influential book, there is also a danger that the purely belletristic criteria of the past might prove to be as much of a liability as an asset. The least-read category of literature according to *Reading at Risk* is drama; only 3.6% of the population read a play in their leisure time in 2002. However, in the same year, 60% went to the movies. But if movies are categorized as a dramatic art (with an important literary component), the “crisis” in literary reading begins to look rather different. To Epstein’s complaint that non-fiction prose has been left out of the survey can be added my own: what is arguably the most impressive achievement in modern American drama—cinema—has been excluded because the form is not purely literary. I don’t dispute the rationale behind the categorization, but I can’t help asking whether those Elizabethans who attended Shakespeare’s plays in The Globe, even if they did not read *Hamlet* or *Lear*, are not to be envied?

As literary scholars and *critics* we have an obligation both to exercise our critical faculties when reading, interpreting, and teaching literature and to subject our categories and principles of judgment to the kind of critical review that informs neither a government statistical survey nor a best-seller list.



RACHEL HADAS

Rutgers University

In E. B. White's "The Future of Reading," published in *The New Yorker* in 1951, an unnamed college president is reported to have "remarked that in fifty years 'only five per cent of the people will be reading.'" Fifty-three years on, that gloomy prophecy, while not wholly fulfilled, is looking a lot more accurate than we would like.

I don't have much stomach for attesting to just how bad the problem has become. Every English teacher has tales of woe. Still less do I have a master plan for addressing, let alone solving, a problem that is so intertwined with technology and with other developments that are less visible but equally pervasive. My intention here is to make an obvious point, to quote a couple of poems, and to offer a local, limited ray of hope.

First, the obvious point. In "The Future of Reading," White adverts more than once to the "audio-visual age" in which he reluctantly finds himself. The media "ask no discipline of the mind" and "are already giving the room the languor of an opium parlor." The notion that television, and now video games and computers, conduce to passivity, couch potato-hood, and obesity, too, is now a commonplace. I only want to submit the observation that it is not only, or even chiefly, passivity that afflicts my students, coming between them and the printed page. It is also distraction. When it comes to fostering a rhythm of infinite interruptibility, the cell phone is a lot more insidious than the TV screen. My students aren't lazy. On the contrary, they're multitasking. But multitasking doesn't consort well with reading.

This incompatibility features in two wonderful American poems about reading: Randall Jarrell's "Children Selecting Books in a Library," from the 1950s, and Richard Wilbur's "Playboy," from the 1960s. Jarrell's evocation of the browsing children suggests a ruminating animal.

The child's head, bent to the book-colored shelves,
Is slow and sidelong and food-gathering,
Moving in blind grace . . .

Wilbur's stockboy reading *Playboy* on his lunch break shows (even though his choice of reading matter hardly counts as literary reading) a kindred absorption. Even the word "sidelong" reappears.

Sometimes, without a glance, he feeds himself,
The left hand, like a mother-bird in flight,

Brings him a sandwich for a sidelong bite,
And then returns to its dusty shelf.

Food is secondary to the bond of eye and page; or rather, the page is the food. In their evocations of a rapt attentiveness, a peacefully voracious state of abstraction, the two poems seem—as poems often do—to be in conversation with each other. White again, in “The Future of Reading”:

Reading is the work of the alert mind, is demanding, and under ideal conditions produces the sort of ecstasy . . . a sublimity and power unequalled by any other form of communication.

And why all this White? I came upon “The Future of Reading” in connection with the fact that for the past week I’ve been teaching *Charlotte’s Web* to my Rutgers undergraduates in a course about children’s literature. Many of the students had never read *Charlotte’s Web* or *The Wizard of Oz* or *The Secret Garden*, though many had seen movies based on these stories. For some of the students—surely not all—to discover, or in some cases rediscover, these wonderful books turned out to be a source of unexpected pleasure; the pleasure of absorption, of surrender, of making the outside world extraneous.

Is it a coincidence that Charlotte tells Wilbur stories, that Mary tells Colin stories, even that Peter Pan flies in through a window because he wants to hear the end of Cinderella? It is too late to give college students the bookish childhoods many people my age were blessed with. But it is never too late to introduce them to, to demonstrate, or—in Keats’s phase—to prove on their pulses the powerful pull of reading, a force that, oddly enough, features as a central theme in so many stories for adults and children alike.



PAUL VOSS

Georgia State University

I recently gave a talk to the local Optimists Club, a respected civic organization dedicated to helping children in the Atlanta community. I did not have a designated topic planned, but I expected to discuss liberal education in some fashion or another. As the host of the breakfast introduced me, he made an off-the-cuff comment about the “easy life” of tenured college professors and “tax dollars.” I quickly decided upon a specific topic for my talk, beginning with the following statement: “I teach Shakespeare at a large public university and your tax dollars should subsidize that undertaking.” Needless to say, I had their attention.

Ten years ago, the idea of presenting such an argument would have seemed to me an absurd waste of time, alien, in fact. As the product of a large American graduate program, I was conditioned to believe that my interests and the fruits of my research had no limitations and that academic freedom meant that I was empowered to pursue those interests without explanation to politicians or to the community at large. Moreover, I believed, the state should help fund that research while remaining a silent partner. I expected it both

ways. This belief was not inspired by hostility as much as arrogance and misunderstanding. The work of academic research in the humanities, as defined by most graduate programs, was to edify and impress those already “in the know,” and not be subject to regular accounting procedures, market economics, or exterior justification of any type.

Upon completing the Ph.D., I accepted a job teaching at a large, urban university where the student body represented the United Nations and diversity was not some administrative buzzword or faculty senate resolution, but a pleasant reality of everyday life. I devoted considerable time to research and published a book, an edition, and about a dozen scholarly articles before receiving tenure. My students, although largely unprepared for the rigors of college life, displayed an eagerness for learning. Indeed, the literature we studied fascinated them. At Georgia State University, I could not divorce my teaching from the “real world,” or approach literature in an elitist, essentialist fashion. Still, I did not consider how or why my research or teaching impacted the larger community; I really never considered the need to justify my work to non-academics, unless they held the title of Dean or higher.

Yet, as I explained to my audience, I delighted in sharing my love of reading with my students (and my family and friends) while fostering the literary imagination. Toward that end, we would read with curious minds, open to the possibilities of genre and the expressions of epic and lyric poetry, along with the complexities of the novel or the play. We laughed at the comedy of Wilde and mourned the fate of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes. We shared our favorite books and pitied those who never experienced the joys of reading.

However, during the past decade at Georgia State University, it has become increasingly obvious that many of my students, including English majors, do not read and have not read with any enthusiasm or sophistication. Especially in the general survey courses, undergraduates reflect the overall trends described in the sobering report *Reading at Risk*. Even before I am old enough to have earned the hard-fought right to cynicism, it is apparent that my students do not know as much as they should know or as they need to know. Specifically, they do not know *how* to read, in the full sense of that term. More dangerously, they don’t *care* to read. Apathy, in this case, is a far greater problem than ignorance.

I am convinced (as are most teachers and parents) that wide reading prepares students to act as educated, productive, enlightened citizens. Strangely, while literacy climbs, reading decreases; literacy therefore becomes a terribly under-utilized skill. Yet in many ways, reading is a pre-condition for liberty and the responsibilities of living as free and responsible individuals. This I explained to the Optimists. I took the argument a step further, saying that a sophisticated literary imagination enhances human flourishing and the richness of human life. In short, we must read and teach reading as though our happiness depended upon it. And that is why, I argued, tax dollars should support secondary and higher education, English departments, and the promotion of reading.

I’ll admit that my rhetoric perhaps reached levels approaching the hyperbolic and even the sentimental, and for that I apologize. However, the sentiments that engendered the flight of fancy were far from sheer bluster and empty pieties.

The government makes a prudent decision when it invests in liberal learning and programs that encourage reading and a love of reading. However, that investment (in the form of tax dollars for large state universities) does not come without strings. We who teach at the college and university level must understand those strings while articulating and defending what we do. We cannot simply take a condescending attitude toward politicians or economic realities; we must engage the conversation and animate the discussion with intelligence and passion. If we ignore the political and economic dimensions of higher education, we will continue to marginalize ourselves and our profession. We must become, at some level, public educators in the full sense of that word, working with high school teachers, civic organizations, reading groups, churches and synagogues, and any other organization that can benefit from our services.

If professors in the humanities, and in English departments in particular, are unwilling to move outside the confines of the profession and professional research, the general erosion of reading will surely increase. If professors seek only to advance knowledge at the highest levels (a noble endeavor, to be sure) and ignore the need for comprehensive literacy (by which I mean broad reading) in high schools, community colleges, and beyond, then we all become impoverished. If, moreover, the professoriate continues to hold the political and economic dimensions of higher education in disdain or as beneath contempt, we shall lose. If we cannot find the time or the inclination to defend the humanities to those groups for which we have only disregard or animosity, why should they fund us? If we fail to meet this challenge, I repeat, we shall lose. We shall not only lose another generation of students, we may very well lose our profession.

 DAVID BROMWICH
Yale University

The NEA report on reading says definitively what many people have long suspected from observation and anecdote. Each generation of young Americans reads fewer books than the last. The report adds to this finding a corollary that we might have guessed. The reading habits of parents have now begun to mimic the habits of their children. People of all ages rely increasingly on the newer, brighter, faster media.

Looking for causes of the change, Mark Bauerlein points out the influence of the Internet, video and computer games, Instant Messaging. It would be hard to overrate the effects of all these—a seduction, in the case of the games, especially irresistible to boys. It is as if the stimulus (to the eye) of instant targeting and the enchantment (to the touch) of perfect dexterity in achieving mock explosions had conjured up an instinct from our hunter-gatherer days.

More dismaying than the allure of the distractions is the indifference with which many parents abandon children to their care. Parents have given way in the belief that the new media present a kind of entertainment and a kind of culture. The identification of culture with entertainment builds the bridge of excuses from bare permission to active

encouragement. The hidden inference is that any entertainment or any culture is better than none; but who can look coolly at that proposition and call it true?

Much of contemporary American experience is only intelligible in the light of certain undeclared assumptions. Churches or coaches are supposed to take care of morality, schools to fill their pupils with science and miscellaneous facts, and culture to act as a baby-sitter. This suggests a stinting economy. It also forgets the part that imagination plays in the shaping of character.

In the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth, books created the imagination of the middle class. You steeped yourself in books in order to imagine other lives and times, and to make a beginning of knowing yourself. History and biography accordingly were among the central genres of literature, as Dr. Johnson recognized: "Our intercourse with intellectual nature is necessary; our speculations upon matter are voluntary and at leisure." By intellectual nature, Johnson meant the minds of other people. "Those authors, therefore," he continued, "are to be read at schools that supply most axioms of prudence, most principles of moral truth, and most materials for conversation; and these purposes are best served by poets, orators, and historians." The books that Johnson called literature he regarded as the basis of intelligent life.

The greatest loss that comes from the weakening influence of books is the loss of an incitement to thinking. Can we even distinguish thinking from grasping the fable or the consecutive argument of a book? The attention that forms the mental element of reading is favorable to patience, and patience is the condition of all thought. But it is not only thinking but feeling that depends on acts of sustained attention.

Habits are gained or lost mainly by processes outside our control. Still, if we suppose that reading is far on the way to becoming the pursuit of a small minority, its continuation remains a task worthy of our best energies. There are practical steps that can be taken, for example, to cut the parasitic feed-line we have thrown to the mass media of distraction. Start with a symptom small enough to have passed unnoticed. Remove the computer games from the computers in public and university libraries, and delete the Internet links from all but a few to be used for research. The stacks will be discovered by students who did not give them a thought before.

While we are at it, we might start further back. Advise parents to read aloud to their children for as long as the children permit it. Once you have gone from Dr. Seuss to Lewis Carroll, why stop there? From Carroll to Dickens is as natural a step.

 MARIA DiBATTISTA
Princeton University

As I write, Azir Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has been regally presiding over the *New York Times* paperback best seller list for forty-seven consecutive weeks. Apparently no such enduring fascination attends reading *Lolita* in Toledo, as we must conclude from *Reading at Risk*, the National Endowment for the Arts' report on the frequency and social breadth

of literary reading in present day America. The findings are dire enough: a 10% drop in literary reading across the general population, an even steeper decline among the young, of whom there are 28% fewer readers than twenty years ago. How are we to reconcile these dispiriting numbers with the abiding popularity of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*? Does the hold—no *grip*—of this book on the popular imagination speak of a baffled but active need for stories about human liberation that does not always take place at the point of the gun?

For the women readers whose experience is chronicled in Nafisi's memoir, reading *Lolita*, because of the pleasure and freedom of mind it afforded, was a semi-clandestine act of resistance. Reading imaginary accounts of human life became—"against all odds," Nafisi reminds us—a way of testing the validity of their own feelings and the truth of public pronouncements about the world. Reading carries no such predictably high risk in democratic societies such as ours, where dissenters, however discouraged and subject to reprisals, rarely suffer the penalties of resistance imposed by more authoritarian regimes. But reading imaginative literature nevertheless does entail risk, foremost a risk to self, but also real and associated risks to the established principles and powers of the dominant culture. We could formulate the potential risk posed by reading as the *Lolita* paradox, by which books written primarily to express and to provide what Nabokov called aesthetic bliss nevertheless can awaken a slumbering, or embolden a diffident, consciousness to seek out reality on its own, not on dictated terms. The *Lolita* paradox tells us something, then, about the importance of literature to the experience and conduct of life. One of the few heartening findings of *Reading at Risk* is the statistical determination that reading does indeed involve us more energetically in life. Those who read are more likely than non-readers to attend performing arts events, visit art museums, be active in volunteer or charity work, attend or participate in sports activity. Gertrude Stein reports in one of her *Lectures in America* that "When I was a child I was always completely fascinated by the sentence, he who runs may read." At the heart of Stein's fascination, surely, is a declaration of human possibility, that, as Stein puts it, "reading and running is one." Human vitality, that sentence proclaims, is all of a piece and needn't compete against or cannibalize itself in its search for rewarding, exhilarating forms of expression.

This is a vision of human possibility, of the place of reading in human life, one that has been largely unacknowledged in our national, often bitter debates on the role of the arts and humanities in articulating and promoting democratic values. *Reading at Risk* suggests the urgent need to restore this vision to public sight. It is a common lament that potential readers, especially the young, are increasingly distracted, even besotted by diversions that compete for the attention of the eye and mind—film and television, the Internet (to which we might add instant and text messaging). But it is also true that we have been sluggish in making arguments for reading that appeal to the instinct to enhance life. Let me give an example of the kind of arguments we should be making. This one comes, appropriately enough, from a work of fiction, Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*. The narrator is describing the young protagonist's love of literature: "He did not think of these books as something invented to beguile the idle hour, but as living creatures, caught in the very behavior of

living,—surprised behind their misleading severity of form and phrase . . . Those rapt evenings beside the lamp gave him a long perspective, influenced his conception of the people about him, made him know just what he wished his own relations with these people to be.” Cather’s young reader is both excited and grateful that his cherished authors “seem to know their business,” and so can help him understand the greater business of living. Literature makes him know his own wishes, gives them form, density and the realized promise, not the empty appearance of life. Our business as teachers and advocates of imaginative literature is to take and to counsel the long perspective amid the persistent clamor for quick gratification. *Reading At Risk* tells us, among others things, that we have not been conducting our business very profitably. We might count ourselves on the brink of cultural solvency if the NEA were to issue, in another twenty years time, a report boasting the title, *Reading Lolita in Tombstone*.



SHARON ALUSOW HART

East Tennessee State University

Reading at Risk is a powerful contribution to what is developing into a serious debate over the relation of reading to technology. When Sven Birkerts published *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* in 1994, he was following a long tradition of letters describing the importance of reading to a vital culture. Essayists even before Montaigne have expressed the exquisite pleasures as well as duties of reading. When Mortimer Adler wrote *How to Read a Book* in 1940, he didn’t have to justify the reason one should read, but, sixty years later, when Harold Bloom issued *How to Read and Why* (2000), it is clear to Bloom—and to many of us teaching in colleges and universities—that justification (the *why* question) must now be included. What Birkerts adds to these excursions is to ask what direction we are taking as we become enmeshed in the cyberworld of the Internet, email, ipods, and ebooks.

This is a timely question given the adoption at my institution of the *Harbrace Handbook*, now published in every form of electronic conveyance. It invites students to web sites, chat rooms, and virtual editing groups to reinforce what is in the text itself. Our profession has become a multimedia endeavor, with overheads and slides giving way to power points, listserves, hypertext, etc. Were we at a disadvantage when all we had before was vulnerable, unexciting bound paper, our students’ imaginations, and our own enthusiasms?

If Birkerts and others are right, and if my own experience is trustworthy, much is lost if the text becomes a handheld screen that can morph into an article (with video clips) from *Sports Illustrated* one minute, then an acted scene of *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii (with subtitles) the next. The rigidity of the resulting multimedia habits already can be observed in young people. Most students have more experience watching TV and playing video games than they do reading, especially reading imaginative literature. Now, with works such as the

Harbrace Handbook, higher education reinforces those habits. Their encounters with books are briefer, their focus on slow, analytical reading less emphasized.

The decline of imaginative reflection may be just one repercussion. The loss of verbal dexterity may well be another. Are we overreacting? Will we be able to manage the tide of electronic experiences that inundate us?

Remembering the cautions of compensation, as Emerson counseled, we will soon realize that we lose more than we gain. As *Reading at Risk* confirms, electronic media are valuable adjuncts to book reading, but they can never replace the imaginative and visceral interaction of reader with physical page and print. If reading is vital at an early age for success in K-12 education, students at the college level must have this value reinforced with specific assignments that sustain book-reading habits.



ROGER SHATTUCK

Independent Scholar

The National Endowment for the Arts report *Reading at Risk* makes especially good sense if one conceives of reading as a cumulative activity in three overlapping stages. First we learn to encode and decode letters into syllables, words, and sentences. Before long we discern the meaning of words and sentences, thus acquiring a working real-world vocabulary. Gradually we build up a stock of verbal patterns (“dog bites man”), social expressions (“Hi!”), and literary conventions such as stories, all of which contribute to our cultural literacy.

“Reading skills” as taught in school refer primarily to fluency in decoding and to development of vocabulary. The third stage, cultural literacy drawn from extended reading passages and complete books, is often taken for granted or set aside. Free choice by student or teacher of what to read does not assure the literary content of the third stage. Only a carefully designed and followed curriculum will bring an appropriately affirmative answer to the fundamental question: Are there books everyone should read before graduating from high school? To answer “yes” represents not a power play but an expression of respect for tradition and history. During four years of service on our local high school board, I became convinced that it is the Board’s responsibility to identify a short list of core books and classics that every student should read. So much emphasis is now placed on student choice and on hands-on projects that avoid sustained reading, that some students graduate without having read and studied selections from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Old and New Testaments, classical mythology, Bacon’s essays, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Walden*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Moby-Dick*. Can our culture survive without them?

I am arguing that reading is not a simple skill acquired primarily in elementary school. Rather, it is a continually developing activity that can lead students to the treasures and pleasures of the core curriculum and to an informed grasp of their own culture. If schools neglect the literary content of reading, administrators and teachers have shirked their responsibility to establish a consecutive and comprehensive program of study.



WENDELL HARRIS

Pennsylvania State University

Although there is little that the faculty of colleges and universities can do directly to combat the pervasive, mind-stupefying effects of television, electronic gadgetry, advertising, and the media generally, there is much that can be, and once was, accomplished in the classroom to encourage students to read, to make reading something to look forward to rather than a chore. By an interesting coincidence, the page in the *ALSC Newsletter* on which appeared Mark Bauerlein's commentary on the report *Reading at Risk* faced Jeffrey Kahan's "Some Advice for Writers of Cover Letters." That candidates for appointments in English departments believe that it is very important if not essential for them to state their political positions and sexual attitudes and/or orientations, as Kahan reports, is excellent evidence for the situation of literary studies today. That situation is simply this: for at least twenty-five years the majority of graduate students have been taught that the application of theory—gender-driven or politically-driven theory—is the goal of literary study and, indeed, of reading. Once hired by departments of literature, the newly-minted faculty members teach what they have been taught. No wonder that the undergraduate students in their classes doubt whether literature is a worthwhile source of either pleasure or insight.

Indeed, they are likely to assume that literature is not especially important since they are required to expose themselves to so little of it—infrequently encountering even literary prose in freshman composition courses. No wonder, either, that the future secondary school teachers taking the courses taught by theory mavens have no idea how to interest the students they will be teaching.

I like to think that Samuel Johnson, who said that no one but a blockhead writes except for money, would have been equally happy to say that no one but the theory-ridden professor of literature reads literature for any reason but enjoyment—often intellectually profitable enjoyment, but enjoyment nevertheless. Such enjoyment is precisely the last thing the average undergraduate is led to expect in present-day literature classes. What the student is all too often asked to focus attention on are instances of racism, sexism, *aporia*, unintentional contradiction, politically objectionable thought, or colonialism.

Of course, there is no shortage of what we now understand to be undesirable attitudes in much pleasure-giving, mind-engaging literature, canonical or not, and it is well to recognize this. Contemporary literary theory has indeed made those of us who still read imaginative literature more aware of the importance of thinking about the social and political implications of what we read. Feminist theory has been especially valuable, not least in discovering excellent works by forgotten women writers.

But surely the value of reading literature that is thoughtfully conceived and well written, whether prose or poetry, fiction or non-fiction, does not lie primarily in offering opportunities for making judgments about political, social, or philosophical correctness. The intelligent reading of novels, dramas, and non-fiction prose of past centuries does require

explanation of the customs, literary traditions, and social structures of the times in which these were written; the reading of poetry requires additional attention to literary figures and structures. But such information ought to aid, not detract from, the recognition of attractive features of style, stimulating expressions of ideas, and suggestions of ways to view human experience. How many students at any level are today led to appreciate the sound of poetry or well-written prose? How many students are led to think—without the filtering interposition of fashionable theoretical machinery—about the application of what authors have written to their thoughts, experiences, tastes, and prejudices? But if once accustomed to the pleasures and values of reading, individuals are much more likely to turn to reading not only literature, but purely informational texts.

Our profession has much to answer for, much to correct. It is up to the teachers of literature to determine whether the delights and profit of reading anything beyond the newspaper will be sought by their students after they leave the classroom. A possible contemporary restatement of Horace's famous dictum might well be: "No pleasure, no reading; no reading, no profit."



DAVID CLEMENS

Monterey Peninsula College

Ironically, I came to the ALSC in New Orleans directly from the 2004 Accelerating Change Conference at Stanford University (<http://www.accelerating.org/lac2004/index.html>). When Mark Bauerlein noted the impact on literary reading of distracting and distorting electronic media, I had to think "You ain't seen nuthin' yet." The *Reading at Risk* study mentions TVs, game consoles, and computers, but it is silent on DVD players, digital video recorders, iPods, blogs, and MP3-playing sunglasses. We are only at the beginning of electronic distraction, and the nature of that distraction is often disquieting. For example, millions of players spend a significant number of hours each day engaged in massive multi-player online role-playing games, or MMORPGs. Ten million people play *The Sims* (http://thesims.ea.com/index_flash.php), one of the so-called "reality games" which allow players to manipulate characters and avatars (online representations of themselves). An even more advanced reality game is ominously called *Second Life* (<http://secondlife.com/>).

Or consider *Kumawar* (<http://www.kumawar.com/>), a weekly computer simulation of a real-world military operation (such as the capture of Saddam Hussein) based on military intel and after-action reports. The operation appears first as a computer modeled news report but then the viewer can go back and "play" the mission as a participant. *Kumawar* hopes to expand beyond military missions to all forms of computer-modeled news.

Such developments raise social concerns, for as Martin Pawley has observed, all pieces of technology act as insulation against human contact. They also raise political concerns—for instance, after being accused of being too sympathetic to the U.S. military, *Kumawar* responded by producing John Kerry Vietnam mission models during the election even

though uncertainty about what had actually happened became a significant campaign issue. In any case, the implications for literature are insidious:

- electronic confections such as *Second Life* and *Kumawar* are almost entirely image-based;
- image-based electronic “stories” compel attention because they are interactive and demand deep neurological involvement;
- electronic diversions close the door to what Robert Pinsky calls “the theater of the imagination.”

In written works, the medium is language in a precise interplay of both suggestiveness and precision. Writing is linear and, like logic, what comes before serves as ground for what comes after. Writing assumes causation, a key ingredient of both morality and historical consciousness. The **reader** moves at the pace he chooses.

Image-based productions employ montage, successions of visuals with connections between them supplied by the **viewer**. One image replaces, rather than follows, another. Instead of causation, there is analogy, association, and implication. The **viewer** moves at the pace of the image cascade.

A **reader** finds haven in the forms of writing which produce, in Pinsky’s words again, the “ritual of expectation,” the comfort and trust of being carried along in a larger design, flowing with the rhythm of sentences, the arc of plot, and the echo of an internal voice.

A **viewer** becomes first stimulated, then numb from the overload of processing continuous incoming electronic data streams. Will Wright, creator of *The Sims*, says he avoids the “procedural” aspects of game worlds. He just likes to hang out in the *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas* ‘hood with his crew, riding a virtual mountain bike, shooting virtual hoops, and drinking virtual beer.

Worst of all, visual media reify what each reader once created within. Image-based media are literal—they concretize what might be tantalizing, suggestive, metaphorical, or symbolic. When my students read Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” each **reader** internally builds the infernal torture machine, a collaboration distinctively Kafka and distinctively personal. But if they encounter Robert Crumb’s graphic version of the same story, their image of the machine is complete, handed to them, and forever Crumb’s.

George Steiner once described literature as “antiworlds” spun from language’s fearsome power to say “that which is not,” an “inner echo chamber” that contains the cultural “codes of recognition.” He even called literary recollection a kind of resistance. Tyranny hates nothing more than those literary fragments that populate each person’s theater of the imagination, as my own “had we but world enough, and time . . .,” “a man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea . . .,” or “till human voices wake us, and we drown.” Conversely, I don’t carry any electronic memories inside me at all. When I play *Halo 2*, I can become the armored Master Chief on an alien world, but my choices are limited to which way I run, which weapon I employ, and which alien I shoot first. And when I finish, there is nothing left to carry into the future.



This report is disturbing in several ways. Its charts seem to show that reading serious literature (even when it is defined as reading “any work of literature of any quality in any language in any print medium,” even “reading” that is listening to books on tape) has become an activity practiced by an ever-decreasing number of Americans. The apparent loss of 20 million readers in twenty years prompts one to ask these fellow citizens what they now do with their eyes and with their attention spans. Perhaps their answer would be that the patience needed to read a novel or long essay is a virtue rendered increasingly irrelevant in a culture of information quickly gained (Google), neural excitement instantly created (video games), and print rapidly supplanted by other media (liquid crystal displays). But *Reading at Risk* would not be satisfied with such an easy answer; it notes that many people who read literature also watch television. The report does not indict the usual suspects.

The problem with *Reading at Risk* is that while it is concerned about the state of reading, it cannot make up its mind about how serious the situation is or what to do about it. As it moves between the funereal and the vaguely encouraging, it offers a mix of conclusions. Its grimmest statistics indicate that reading has declined at every level. The U.S., it says, has fallen behind Canada and several European nations in reading rates. And at its most apocalyptic, it announces that “literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century.” But in another paragraph, it cheerfully says that, “with nearly one-half of Americans participating, literary reading is clearly one of the nation’s favorite pastimes.”

Reading at Risk is not all grim tidings and apocalypse, nor is it all gloom. It notes that in 2000, more than 122,000 new books were published and that the industry sold a total of 2.5 billion books. In 25 years, book sales have tripled. It also notes, among its happier but hardly counter-intuitive findings, that you are more likely to read literature the more money and the more education you have. Employed people read more than those out of work. Women read more than men; people who live in cities read more than people elsewhere. The West and Northeast have the highest reading rates. Could the authors have known that a short-hand way of describing America’s readers would be to say that, by and large, they turn out to be Kerry supporters?

Reading at Risk gives news both good and bad. Books abound. On the other hand, younger people seem to read less. Reading might disappear yet the publishing industry is doing very well. Many people do, in fact, read “serious literature.” The authors of *Reading at Risk* show that reading in this country is *more* popular than participation in most other cultural, athletic, and leisure activities.

Amid this confusion, the most discouraging feature of *Reading at Risk* is that it is devoid of a strategy to revive the habit of reading where it has been lost. It ends by saying (in a sentence that should be *read* carefully): “It is time to inspire a nationwide renaissance

of literary reading.” For *whom* to provide such inspiration? The sentence lacks the element every good reader would have wanted: the agent of the action. Here the report is silent. One might compare it with the *9-11 Commission Report*. Facing a threat immensely more significant than the apparent diminution of serious reading in the United States, it came forth with specific and direct recommendations. Absent a strategy and in tone both grave and encouraging, *Reading at Risk* supplies news at once good and bad and ends only with vague hopes.



JOHN HOLBO

National University of Singapore

With regard to hot-button cultural issues it is easy to feel we know more than we do. We know we don't know what elements compose Titan's atmosphere (until Cassini-Huygens beams that data back). It is almost as hard to know—but harder to admit we don't—what elements compose our cultural atmosphere . . . until a study like *Reading At Risk* provides the data. Let us let the numbers speak.

Since the numbers look bad, this sounds like counsel for cultural optimists to study pessimism. But the trouble with letting these numbers speak is how soon they run out of things to say. Nor is this the fault of the study, but it is a feature. The world of 2002 is a gulf apart from 1982, which had few personal computers and little media-on-demand (apart from music). I take it to have been a foregone conclusion that literary reading would decline dramatically in the face of technology-driven competition. When the restaurant adds new dishes, old ones get ordered less. You don't infer that the restaurant got worse, not necessarily.

We have an apples vs. oranges qualitative conundrum. We may as well add that it is qualitative along at least two axes: new and old; good and bad new and old. *Reading At Risk* only counts apples and counts the rotten ones. Reading a bad book qualifies your nose as belonging to a reader. The study has been criticized for its openness (by Harold Bloom, among others). But this is misguided. The blunt definition of 'reader' makes the numbers solid. It is proper for the survey to stand on solid ground. Only in this way can one be an honest broker in disputes about the qualitative state of the culture.

Mark Bauerlein's introduction steps across the gap between quantity and quality. Let me offer counterpoints to his points. He writes that the rate of decline is “startling” but, if I may say so, that 57% of young adults read no literature, down from 40%, is hardly more startling than the 40% figure itself, which was already true in 1982. If the Republic survived 40%, perhaps 60% will not be profoundly worse. I do not mean to be flip; I merely hint that literary folk ought to consider that the evidence shows not just that reading is declining, but that the non-literary life is culturally viable. This is not relativism, though it is a kind of pluralism-through-agnosticism.

I realize the crisis is implicit in the downward trajectory. I admit the validity of this concern, though arrows can change course. So we wait and hope? Let us step back. Here

is Lionel Trilling, 50 years ago, on the decline of literature and, in particular, on the apparently accelerating alienation of educated Americans from literature.

In the nineteenth century, in this country as in Europe, literature underlay every activity of mind. The scientist, the philosopher, the historian, the theologian, the economist, the social theorist, and even the politician, were required to command literary abilities which would now be thought irrelevant to their respective callings.

What exercises Bauerlein is precisely this sense of loss. Reversing Bauerlein's approach, though, Trilling proceeds from qualitative to quantitative speculation:

Of two utterances of equal quality, one of the nineteenth and one of the twentieth century, we can say that the one of the nineteenth century had the greater power. If the mechanical means of communication were then less efficient than now, the intellectual means were far more efficient. There may even be a significant ratio between the two.

Today the communications technologies of 1946 look as formidable as a buggy whip; even that was enough to whip poor literature. But mock-Laws of Inverse Power and Efficiency—though eloquently expressive of dismay—are doubtfully true. Likewise, a tendency to see the survey numbers as expressing something like what Trilling asserts can generate trouble.

For example, in contrasting the literary reading experience (as glorious synthesis of analysis and imagination) with the attention deficit-disordered digital lives of today's dexterous-thumbed teens, Bauerlein risks weighing the best apples against the worst oranges. But surely there are some bright young digital things, and many readers ease themselves into paperback potboilers and snooze passively through. Best must be weighed against best, worst against worst. (If we are in the mood for fanciful calculus: take the integral of the literary curve and the digital curve, then see which encloses more area—more total value.)

Bauerlein also generalizes about styles of reception. He comes close to equating non-linear, ergo non-literary, absorption of material with superficial surfing or skimming. He hereby puts his finger on a characteristic mode of interaction with our media-saturated environments. But non-linear cannot equal superficial or bad. No one would denigrate the value of painting, merely because the eye darts from point to point on the canvas, which it does. (It is hard even to equate superficial with bad, surfaces being fine things in their way.) I hereby indicate the hazards of generalizing, even around a safe kernel like "the digital age encourages superficial surfing." Of course, in a short piece, on a large subject, one is practically obliged. Still, there are no secure generalizations. Bauerlein knows this and may expect his readers to make allowances. But it strikes me as bad diplomacy, even if it is pardonable intellectual shorthand. One ought to bend over backwards to give competition its potential due if what one hopes to extract, in return, is the utmost due for literature.

On the other hand, I have just read an account by a high school teacher of his difficulties getting students to read novels or any book longer than 200 pages. This confirms Bauerlein's suspicion to the very page limit. What is most interesting in this teacher's

report is how, even after he has flogged his charges past this frozen limit (like some indomitable Shackleton of story, the students must feel); even when the work is just a fantasy novel; even when students find they enjoy it, they cannot understand it. There's your cultural decline.

Returning to our survey, I think the most surprising data point is the strong correlation between reading and civic activity, including sporting event attendance. Paradoxically, reading is for those with the initiative to get up and go. I doubt reading causes initiative. In an age in which entertainment forms are under selective pressure to gratify ever more instantaneously, a disposition to concentrate, plan, defer gratification for the sake of some project may have become a prerequisite for (old-fashioned) literary reading. Trilling relates how William Dean Howells, finding a copy of *Don Quixote* in a barrel of books, conceived the desire to write a biography of Cervantes at the tender age of 15. This being pre-Civil War Ohio, the Don found himself in a comparatively soft local media market. Today his throat would be cut in three seconds by TV and video games.

What makes this narrative of decline delicate, however, is that it is a fallacy to suppose everything capable of beating the Don in a three-second dash is aesthetically or intellectually compromised. The Internet is a wonder. There are lots of good shows on TV. Every year Hollywood produces several fine films. The sheer mass of mass culture can be nauseating, the sum looking worse than the parts. Yet there is something golden about our popular culture. (I am an Emersonian: the sun also shines today.) The proper thing to say, if this is right, is not that contemporary culture is bad. But certain kinds of goods are squeezed to the side, if not to the brink. Literary reading declines with tectonic inexorability.

What to do? Bauerlein makes the point that cultural studies, media studies, etc. have made inroads against traditional literary study, pleading relevance without fulfilling their promise. I would push back from a different angle. The relevance of these subjects is undeniable. But water is relevant to fish, so much so that we do not teach fish to swim. Rather than pushing back on behalf of tradition, I say speak on behalf of balance. Culture that gratifies instantaneously may be wonderful but does not build attention spans. Liberal arts education means well-rounded development. So while I do not dispute Bauerlein's claim that studies "cast doubt on the benefits of digital practice to reading," it seems more winning not to hint in this way that it is the job of digital practice to confer benefits to reading.

Bauerlein concludes by declaring there is another ground for defending literary values: "our literary inheritance is a value in itself." But this is in fact his ground throughout. Bauerlein's arguments concern the value of digital culture for literature, or the value of certain habits for appreciating literature. I would not bother to flyspeck his introduction in this way but I do think it is crucial to argue more instrumentally, the more securely to stand on inherent value. It is even more important to distinguish between claiming inherent value, while alleging digital encroachment, and claiming superior value over digital (etc.). We should avoid sliding lightly from the former to the latter.



BRUCE GANS

Wilbur Wright College

The National Endowment for the Arts recently published a study showing that fewer and fewer adults and college age people are reading literature. As a Professor of English and founder of a Great Books Curriculum at Wright Community College in Chicago, whose population is predominantly minority and non-traditional, I spend more or less every day working on the effects of adults not reading and observing key reasons for it. But before proceeding further I have to confess that my concern is with the decline of serious literature in its broadest sense. I do not believe it matters one way or the other whether adults are reading the light literature—mysteries, westerns, spy novels—or watching such things on television.

Now, there is one key reason for this decline that is never talked about. It is like the dead elephant behind the couch, and nothing will improve until its presence is acknowledged. This is that many English faculty do not read or teach serious literature, and neither the institution they work for, nor the publishing houses that provide them with textbooks, nor the field itself wants them to.

Plainly, reading serious literature with proficiency and ease is not an inborn human trait. It is a skill, and adults are far less likely to read serious literature if they have never been taught how to do it.

Today, a community college faculty member interested in using serious literature as the basis of work in core composition courses faces an uphill battle of persuading the department and the administration that doing so is of more value to students than teaching how to write a cover letter for a resume, a letter of complaint to a merchant, or a movie review. They must tirelessly point out that the ability to read and respond to serious literature develops the ability to abstract the universal from the particular, the significant from the insignificant. It dramatically increases cultural literacy and historical awareness, and thus instills in students a perspective on their lives and knowledge of the world around them they can get in no other way. Ideas take on reality only when epitomized in a word; the reading of serious literature is instrumental in enlarging students by increasing their vocabulary. Even the partial master of serious literature boosts the academic confidence of students and prepares them for the increased proficiency that comes with subsequent exposures.

These skills and opportunities are especially crucial for the minority and non-traditional students enrolled in community colleges. Unfortunately, the odds of these students being able to gain these benefits are long, very long. Without the professors' support, their only opportunity to read serious literature passes by un-seized.

These are the reasons why. For one, it is more important to a typical community college administrator that a new English department faculty hire be of the correct ethnic category to satisfy diversity hiring quotas than that the faculty be well- and widely-read in serious literature.

Also, many English faculty themselves do not want to teach serious literature. They would rather teach students about movies, comic books with social content, science fiction, and left wing causes dear to their hearts. Serious literature does not interest them. They are like lawyers bored by the law, but unable to switch fields. And they are encouraged in their alternate pursuits in a field that considers teaching such fare innovative and cutting-edge.

It is so ingrained today as to be taken for granted in English Departments at community colleges that the field itself considers literature optional, or, at least, of less pedagogical value than reprints of magazine articles and op-ed pieces. If faculty make a comprehensive effort to teach serious literature in place of these things, or express disdain for teaching journalism instead of serious literature in core composition courses, they often become objects of suspicion and resentment by administrators and colleagues.

There are two reasons for this. One is that in too many cases faculty are not able to read serious literature—they don't have the intellectual skills or the intellectual hunger, ambition or, above all, curiosity—and so naturally they feel threatened by others who do. But rather than diligently attempting to fill in their intellectual blanks, they take the more gratifying route of resenting the more literate and casting them as elitists and snobs.

The problem of serious literature not being taught in English departments has now been regnant for so long that today composition job candidates arrive from universities where their professors did not teach them literature either, and so they turn up knowing little about it other than having an aversion to it (paraphrase: "Who cares about all that stuffy pointy-headed serious literature stuff which is too boring and hard and anyhow I am a better teacher than someone who is well read because I can relate to my students because I can have them write about popular culture").

In hiring committee meetings with fellow tenured English professors, a faculty member who advocates hiring a candidate who is conversant with serious literature is commonly told, "We don't need literature teachers. You don't have to be a literature teacher to work here." And so the advocate is reduced to pleading to ears of varying degrees of deafness: "Being unread does not make you a moral leper. Many people are far superior human beings than people who are well read. In the grand scheme of things it is much more important to be a good human being. But it is not too much to expect that someone looking to be hired in an English Department be well read."

A dean and a department chair at the larger and more prestigious and influential University of Illinois at Chicago disagree. At a conference I attended, the dean delivered a paper entitled "Why It Does Not Matter What You Read," while his colleague recommended that students be assigned newspaper columnists writing television reviews, which he called "criticism."

And so the question stands: how are students going to learn to read serious literature? Students enter college handicapped by cultural illiteracy and an untrained imagination. They are unable to abstract relevance from anything outside their immediate knowledge and experience. They pay tuition and attend class to have these handicaps removed. Once

enrolled, they are betrayed by the message too many English faculty communicate through their curricular choices, namely that one need not respect serious literature.

Like the French Police Chief in *Casablanca* who is “shocked, shocked” to see gambling going on in Rick’s Café as a croupier hands him last night’s winnings, we can only feign amazement to see the Arts Endowment document the decline in reading serious literature. In the one castle keep given sole responsibility in the world for preserving and teaching serious literature, one finds professors with so anemic a moral and intellectual imagination that they are resistant to or incapable of doing the hard work of teaching students why *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is more relevant to their lives than are essays about what the latest obscene gesture by an athlete during a sporting event says about our society.

These anti-intellectual, anti-high culture attitudes have terrible effects on students. They shape what students read at college and during the rest of their lives. Sad to say, it is an attitude often shared by college administrations and the educational publishing industry. Too many administrations are openly suspicious of teaching literature in their shop. Composition courses are seen by them as the basic job of community college English departments, handling the courses that pay the bills. Teaching literature is looked upon as “fun,” and therefore as “getting out of doing your job.” This is an attitude that says literature has no necessary connection to anything of universal and fundamental usefulness and importance, that mastery of literature is a sign of over-intellectualization.

Even if you wanted to use serious literature as the basis of a core composition course, most textbooks would not serve your needs. The typical composition textbook consists of reprints of general interest magazine articles that by their nature do nothing to raise cultural literacy or illuminate perennial facets of the human condition. Most strive to be inoffensive and generalized enough to enable the publisher to sell the most copies. The topics lean toward mundane, politically correct clichés. Should the government help the homeless or let them keel over dead in the streets? Should there be racial profiling? Is multiculturalism a good thing? Is war good? Should corporations supply childcare to employees? Is a materialist society morally permissible? (Such themes, one should note, are posed by an author and presented by a publisher who aim to make the largest possible profit for themselves.) My favorite was an article on cell phone usage while driving whose point was to get students to write on whether it should be permitted or not.

With a few colleagues at Wright, I am presently trying to work up our own literature-rich versions of the standard English composition class so that we can offer something that will challenge our students and inspire us. In doing so, we are forced like so many Robinson Crusoes to fashion intellectual tools and pedagogical living quarters out of things we find on the beach.

None of this would matter, of course, unless something very important and broad-ranging were at stake. Why else, to quote Bob and Ray, this “threnody, this jeremiad, call it what you will”?

Let me demonstrate it with a piece of anecdotal evidence. As I mentioned earlier, I am the founder of the Wright College Great Books Curriculum, which serves minority and

non-traditional students. This semester I am requiring my students in a research-and-argumentation course to write their papers and base our discussions on the first four books of Titus Livy's *History of Rome*. Livy is a superb storyteller, and the first four books contain rousing versions of many of the most important myths of Western Civilization. Of equal and greater importance, the first four books constitute one of the most eye opening and influential accounts in history of ongoing class conflict between the rich and the poor and how it was painfully resolved through changes in the Roman government from an oligarchy to something approaching a democracy.

Students studying these materials learned nothing about whether one should talk on a cell phone while driving, but they did get a chance to think about class conflict in a setting uncontaminated by the views of their friends, family, and the media (as normally happens with present day "relevant" events). They did not discuss the virtues of corporations providing day care but they were able to make connections in class discussions between ancient world issues and their contemporary equivalents—that is, to practice without realizing it their capacity to abstract the universal from the particular. They were able to study the different forms of duplicity practiced by typical politicians—back then when politics was truly a blood sport.

Moreover, they are now partly equipped to recognize the same social conflicts over the question of redistribution of land and the nature of bankruptcy laws discussed in Madison's Federalist No. 10 and in Machiavelli's *Discourses* (which looks at Livy's account in analyzing the dangers in changing the reform of the constitution of his native Florence). Needless to say, they had not heard of either author or work prior to taking the class. Now, their horizons have changed. I went online the other day and ran across a description of a 300-level course in the classics department of a major university which concerned the decemvirs and realized with a shock that my working class, minority, and non-traditional students are now in a position to know exactly what that professor will be examining.

I know this because in a paper written by a young working class Filipino woman appeared the following thesis paragraph, which while struggling with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle to which she was exposed, does show the birth of the ability to think about and handle ideas of deep importance.

The focus of this paper is justice. To some people justice can be defined as the stronger rules the weak. Although the strongest may not be the smartest or the fairest. To others justice can be defined as fairness, moral integrity or even equality. This paper will examine the tyranny of Appius and the decemvirs and how practical values of justice keep a society functioning smoothly.

By reading Livy these students also incidentally increased their cultural literacy. They now know about Aeneas and Anchises, Romulus and Remus, Horatio at the Bridge, the Rape of the Sabine Women, the Twelve Tables of the Law, King Numa, the Tarpian Rock, Scaevola and so on. In this particular regard, apropos of the problem we have been examining, these minority and non-traditional students are on their way to becoming more culturally literate than many faculty.