

WHY READ?

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Literary Life

READING THROUGH A volume of modern poetry not long ago, I came upon some lines that seemed to me to concentrate a strong and true sense of what there is to gain from great writing. The lines were by William Carlos Williams and they ran this way: "Look at / what passes for the new," Williams wrote. "You will not find it there but in / despised poems. / It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." Williams asserts that though all of us are surrounded all the time with claims on our attention—film, TV, journalism, popular music, advertising, and the many other forms that pass for the new—there may be no medium that can help us learn to live our lives as well as poetry, and literature overall, can.

People die miserably every day for lack of what is found in despised poems—in literary artwork, in other words, that society at large denigrates. My own life and the lives of many others I've known offer testimony for what Williams has to say. Reading woke me up. It took me from a world of harsh limits into expanded possibility. Without poetry, without literature and art, I (and I believe many others, too) could well have died miserably. It was this belief in great writing that, thirty years ago, made me become a teacher.

Yet most of the people who do what I do now—who teach literature at colleges and universities—are far from believing Williams. Nearly all of them would find his lines overstated and idealizing. Many now see all of literature—or at least the kind of

literature that's commonly termed canonical—as an outmoded form. It's been surpassed by theory, or rendered obsolete with the passage of time. To quote Williams on the value of poetry, without suitable condescension, at the next meeting of the Modern Language Association would be to invite no end of ridicule.

Does everyone who teaches literature hold this dismissive attitude? Not quite. But those who are better disposed to literary art tend to an extreme timidity. They find it embarrassing to talk about poetry as something that can redeem a life, or make it worth living. (Though they may feel these things to be true.) Those few professors who still hold literature in high regard often treat it aesthetically. Following Kant, they're prone to remove literary art from the push and toss of day-to-day life. They want to see poems and novels as autonomous artifacts that have earned the right to be disconnected from common experience. One admires great literary works as aesthetic achievements. But on actual experience, they should have no real bearing at all.

Other professors who still call themselves humanists are often so vague in their articulated sense of what great writing offers—it cultivates sensitivity; it augments imagination; it teaches tolerance—that their views are easily swept aside by the rigorous-sounding debunkers. Yet Williams is anything but vague. The most consequential poems offer something that is new—or, one might say “truth”—that makes significant life possible. Without such truth, one is in danger of miserable death, the kind of death that can come from living without meaning, without intensity, focus, or design.

The moral of this book is that Williams has it right. Poetry—literature in general—is *the* major cultural source of vital options for those who find that their lives fall short of their highest

hopes. Literature is, I believe, our best goad toward new beginnings, our best chance for what we might call secular rebirth. However much society at large despises imaginative writing, however much those supposedly committed to preserve and spread literary art may demean it, the fact remains that in literature there abide major hopes for human renovation. This book is addressed to teachers. We teachers of literature, and of the humanities overall, now often stand between our students and their best aspirations, preventing them from getting what literary art has to offer. With all the resources at hand to help our students change their lives for the better, and despite real energy and dedication, most of us still fail in our most consequential task. Purportedly guides to greater regions of experience, we have become guards on the parapets, keeping others out.

This book is also written to students and potential students of literature—to all those who might dream of changing their current state through encounters with potent imaginations. You are invited to read over the shoulders of your teachers. You are invited, if need be, to supplant them: For much of what teachers can offer, you can provide for yourself. It is often simply a matter of knowing where to start. It's a matter of knowing what you might ask for and get from a literary education.

In Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, there is a passage that gets close to the core of what a literary education should be about. The passage offers a deep sense of what we can ask from a consequential book. Proust speaks with the kind of clarity that is peculiarly his about what he hopes his work will achieve. In particular, he reflects on the relation he wants to strike with his readers. “It seemed to me,” he observes, “that they would not be ‘my’ readers but readers of their own selves, my book being

merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers—it would be my book but with it I would furnish them the means of reading what lay inside themselves. So that I would not ask them to praise me or to censure me, but simply to tell me whether ‘it really is like that.’ I should ask whether the words that they read within themselves are the same as those which I have written.”

What Proust is describing is an act of self-discovery on the part of his reader. Immersing herself in Proust, the reader may encounter aspects of herself that, while they have perhaps been in existence for a long time, have remained unnamed, undescribed, and therefore in a certain sense unknown. One might say that the reader learns the language of herself; or that she is humanly enhanced, enlarging the previously constricting circle that made up the border of what she’s been. One might also say, using another idiom, one that has largely passed out of circulation, that her consciousness has been expanded.

Proust’s professed hope for his readers isn’t unrelated to the aims that Emerson, a writer Proust admired, attributes to the ideal student he describes in “The American Scholar”: “One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, ‘He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies.’ There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.”

For Emerson, the reader can do more than discover the language of herself in great writing. Emerson’s reader uses a book as an imaginative goad. He can begin compounding visions of experience that pass beyond what’s manifest in the

book at hand. This, presumably, is what happened when Shakespeare read Holinshed’s *Chronicles* or even Plutarch’s *Lives*. These are major sources for the plays, yes, but in reading them Shakespeare made their sentences doubly significant, and the sense of their authors as broad as the world.

Proust and Emerson touch on two related activities that are central to a true education in the humanities. The first is the activity of discovering oneself as one is in great writing. The second, and perhaps more important, is to see glimpses of a self—and too, perhaps, of a world—that might be, a self and world that you can begin working to create. “Reading,” Proust says in a circumspect mood, “is on the threshold of the spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it.”

Proust and Emerson point toward a span of questions that matter especially for the young, though they count for us all, too. They are questions that should lie at the core of a liberal arts education. Who am I? What might I become? What is this world in which I find myself? How might it be changed for the better?

We ought to value great writing preeminently because it enjoins us to ask and helps us to answer these questions, and others like them. It helps us to create and re-create ourselves, often against harsh odds. So I will be talking here about the crafting of souls, in something of the spirit that Socrates did. “This discussion,” Socrates said, referring to one of his philosophical exchanges, “is not about any chance question, but about the way one should live.”

I think that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to give people an enhanced opportunity to decide how they should live their lives. So I will be talking about the uses of the liberal arts for the conduct of life. I will be describing the humanities as a

source of truth. I will be asking teachers to think back to the days when reading and thinking about books first swept them in and changed them, and asking them to help their students have that kind of transforming experience.

A reader removed from the debates about the liberal arts that have been going on over the past few decades would, on hearing the aims for this book, perhaps smile at how superfluous and unoriginal they seem. Of course, universities should present humanities students with what Matthew Arnold called "the best that is known and thought" and give them the chance to reaffirm or remake themselves based on what they find.

To the charge of lacking originality, I plead guilty. I have already cited Proust and Emerson; this book will be filled with the wisdom of many others, often similarly well-known. But as to my argument being superfluous: I can assure you that is not the case. Universities now are far from offering the kind of experience that Allan Bloom, a writer with whose work I have something like a love-hate relationship, is describing when he observes that "true liberal education requires that the student's whole life be radically changed by it, that what he learns may affect his action, his tastes, his choices, that no previous attachment be immune to examination and hence re-evaluation. Liberal education puts everything at risk and requires students who are able to risk everything."

By this definition, true liberal education barely exists in America now. It is almost nowhere to be found. We teachers have become timid and apologetic. We are not willing to ask the questions that matter. Into the void that we have created largely by our fear, other forces have moved. Universities have become sites not for human transformation, but for training and for entertaining. Unconfronted by major issues, students

use the humanities as they can. They use them to prepare for lucrative careers. They acquire marketable skills. Or, they find in their classes sources of easy pleasure. They read to enjoy, but not to become other than they are. "You must change your life," says Rilke's sculpture of Apollo to the beholder. So says every major work of intellect and imagination, but in the university now—as in the culture at large—almost no one hears.

Total Entertainment All the Time

I CAN DATE my sense that something was going badly wrong in my own teaching to a particular event. It took place on evaluation day in a class I was giving on the works of Sigmund Freud. The class met twice a week, late in the afternoon, and the students, about fifty undergraduates, tended to drag in and slump, looking slightly disconsolate, waiting for a jump start. To get the discussion moving, I often provided a joke, an anecdote, an amusing query. When you were a child, I had asked a few weeks before, were your Halloween costumes id costumes, superego costumes, or ego costumes? Were you monsters—creatures from the black lagoon, vampires, and werewolves? Were you Wonder Women and Supermen? Or were you something in between? It often took this sort of thing to raise them from the habitual torpor.

But today, evaluation day, they were full of life. As I passed out the assessment forms, a buzz rose up in the room. Today they were writing their course evaluations; their evaluations of Freud, their evaluations of me. They were pitched into high gear. As I hurried from the room, I looked over my shoulder to see them scribbling away like the devil's auditors. They were writing

furiously, even the ones who struggled to squeeze out their papers and journal entries word by word.

But why was I distressed, bolting out the door of my classroom, where I usually held easy sway? Chances were that the evaluations would be much like what they had been in the past: they'd be just fine. And in fact, they were. I was commended for being "interesting," and complimented for my relaxed and tolerant ways; my sense of humor and capacity to connect the material we were studying with contemporary culture came in for praise.

In many ways, I was grateful for the evaluations, as I always had been, just as I'm grateful for the chance to teach in an excellent university surrounded everywhere with very bright people. But as I ran from that classroom, full of anxious intimations, and then later as I sat to read the reports, I began to feel that there was something wrong. There was an undercurrent to the whole process I didn't like. I was disturbed by the evaluation forms themselves with their number ratings ("What is your ranking of the instructor?—1, 2, 3, 4, or 5"), which called to mind the sheets they circulate after a TV pilot plays to the test audience in Burbank. Nor did I like the image of myself that emerged—a figure of learned but humorous detachment, laid-back, easygoing, cool. But most of all, I was disturbed by the attitude of calm consumer expertise that pervaded the responses. I was put off by the serenely implicit belief that the function of Freud—or, as I'd seen it expressed on other forms, in other classes, the function of Shakespeare, of Wordsworth or of Blake—was diversion and entertainment. "Edmundson has done a fantastic job," said one reviewer, "of presenting this difficult, important & controversial material in an enjoyable and approachable way."

Enjoyable: I enjoyed the teacher. I enjoyed the reading. En-

joyed the course. It was pleasurable, diverting, part of the culture of readily accessible, manufactured bliss: the culture of Total Entertainment All the Time.

As I read the reviews, I thought of a story I'd heard about a Columbia University instructor who issued a two-part question at the end of his literature course. Part one: What book in the course did you most dislike? Part two: What flaws of intellect or character does that dislike point up in you? The hand that framed those questions may have been slightly heavy. But at least they compelled the students to see intellectual work as a confrontation between two people, reader and author, where the stakes mattered. The Columbia students were asked to relate the quality of an encounter, not rate the action as though it had unfolded across the big screen. A form of media connoisseurship was what my students took as their natural right.

But why exactly were they describing the Oedipus complex and the death drive as interesting and enjoyable to contemplate? Why were they staring into the abyss, as Lionel Trilling once described his own students as having done, and commending it for being a singularly dark and fascinatingly contoured abyss, one sure to survive as an object of edifying contemplation for years to come? Why is the great confrontation—the rugged battle of fate where strength is born, to recall Emerson—so conspicuously missing? Why hadn't anyone been changed by my course?

To that question, I began to compound an answer. We Americans live in a consumer culture, and it does not stop short at the university's walls. University culture, like American culture at large, is ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images. We Americans are six percent of the world's population: we use a quarter of its

oil; we gorge while others go hungry; we consume everything with a vengeance and then we produce movies and TV shows and ads to celebrate the whole consumer loop. We make it—or we appropriate it—we “enjoy” it and we burn it up, pretty much whatever “it” is. Someone coming of age in America now, I thought, has few available alternatives to the consumer world-view. Students didn’t ask for it, much less create it, but they brought a consumer Weltanschauung to school, where it exerted a potent influence.

The students who enter my classes on day one are generally devotees of spectatorship and of consumer-cool. Whether they’re sorority-fraternity denizens, piercer-tattooers, gay or straight, black or white, they are, nearly across the board, very, very self-contained. On good days, there’s a light, appealing glow; on bad days, shuffling disgruntlement. But there is little fire, little force of spirit or mind in evidence.

More and more, we Americans like to watch (and not to do). In fact watching is our ultimate addiction. My students were the progeny of two hundred available cable channels and omnipresent Blockbuster outlets. They grew up with their noses pressed against the window of that second spectral world that spins parallel to our own, the World Wide Web. There they met life at second or third hand, peering eagerly, taking in the passing show, but staying remote, apparently untouched by it. So conditioned, they found it almost natural to come at the rest of life with a sense of aristocratic expectation: “What have you to show me that I haven’t yet seen?”

But with this remove comes timidity, a fear of being directly confronted. There’s an anxiety at having to face life firsthand. (The way the word “like” punctuates students’ speech—“I was like really late for like class”—indicates a discomfort with immediate experience and a wish to maintain distance, to live

in a simulation.) These students were, I thought, inclined to be both lordly and afraid.

The classroom atmosphere they most treasured was relaxed, laid-back, cool. The teacher should never get exercised about anything, on pain of being written off as a buffoon. Nor should she create an atmosphere of vital contention, where students lost their composure, spoke out, became passionate, expressed their deeper thoughts and fears, or did anything that might cause embarrassment. Embarrassment was the worst thing that could befall one; it must be avoided at whatever cost.

Early on, I had been a reader of Marshall McLuhan, and I was reminded of his hypothesis that the media on which we as a culture have become dependent are themselves cool. TV, which seemed on the point of demise, so absurd had it become to the culture of the late sixties, rules again. To disdain TV now is bad form; it signifies that you take yourself far too seriously. TV is a tranquilizing medium, a soporific, inducing in its devotees a light narcosis. It reduces anxiety, steadies and quiets the nerves. But it also deadens. Like every narcotic, it will, consumed in certain doses, produce something like a hangover, the habitual watchers’ irritable languor that persists after the TV is off. It’s been said that the illusion of knowing and control that heroin engenders isn’t entirely unlike the TV consumer’s habitual smug-torpor, and that seems about right.

Those who appeal most on TV over the long haul are low-key and nonassertive. Enthusiasm quickly looks absurd. The form of character that’s most ingratiating on the tube, that’s most in tune with the medium itself, is laid-back, tranquil, self-contained, and self-assured. The news anchor, the talk-show host, the announcer, the late-night favorite—all are prone to display a sure sense of human nature, avoidance of illusion, reliance on timing and strategy rather than on aggressiveness or inspiration. With such

figures, the viewer is invited to identify. On what's called reality TV, on game shows, quiz shows, inane contests, we see people behaving absurdly, outraging the cool medium with their firework personalities. Against such excess the audience defines itself as worldly, laid-back, and wise.

Is there also a financial side to the culture of cool? I believed that I saw as much. A cool youth culture is a marketing bonanza for producers of the right products, who do all they can to enlarge that culture and keep it humming. The Internet, TV, and magazines teem with what I came to think of as persona ads, ads for Nikes and Reeboks and Jeeps and Blazers that don't so much endorse the powers of the product per se as show you what sort of person you'll inevitably become once you've acquired it. The Jeep ad that featured hip outdoorsy kids flinging a Frisbee from mountaintop to mountaintop wasn't so much about what Jeeps can do as it was about the kind of people who own them: vast, beautiful creatures, with godlike prowess and childlike tastes. Buy a Jeep and be one with them. The ad by itself is of little consequence, but expand its message exponentially and you have the central thrust of postmillennial consumer culture: buy in order to be. Watch (coolly) so as to learn how to be worthy of being watched (while being cool).

To the young, I thought, immersion in consumer culture, immersion in cool, is simply felt as natural. They have never known a world other than the one that accosts them from every side with images of mass-marketed perfection. Ads are everywhere: on TV, on the Internet, on billboards, in magazines, sometimes plastered on the side of the school bus. The forces that could challenge the consumer style are banished to the peripheries of culture. Rare is the student who arrives at college knowing something about the legacy of Marx or Marcuse, Gandhi or Thoreau. And by the time she does encounter them,

they're presented as diverting, interesting, entertaining—or perhaps as objects for rigorously dismissive analysis—surely not as guides to another kind of life.

As I saw it, the specter of the uncool was creating a subtle tyranny for my students. It's apparently an easy standard to subscribe to, the standard of cool, but once committed to it, you discover that matters are different. You're inhibited, except on ordained occasions, from showing feeling, stifled from trying to achieve anything original. Apparent expressions of exuberance now seem to occur with dimming quotation marks around them. Kids celebrating at a football game ironically play the roles of kids celebrating at a football game, as it's been scripted on multiple TV shows and ads. There's always self-observation, no real letting-go. Students apparently feel that even the slightest departure from the reigning code can get you genially ostracized. This is a culture tensely committed to a laid-back norm.

In the current university environment, I saw, there was only one form of knowledge that was generally acceptable. And that was knowledge that allowed you to keep your cool. It was fine to major in economics or political science or commerce, for there you could acquire ways of knowing that didn't compel you to reveal and risk yourself. There you could stay detached. And—what was at least as important—you could acquire skills that would stand you in good financial stead later in life. You could use your education to make yourself rich. All of the disciplines that did not traduce the canons of cool were thriving. It sometimes seemed that every one of my first-year advisees wanted to major in economics, even when they had no independent interest in the subject. They'd never read an economics book, had no attraction to the business pages of the *Times*. They wanted economics because word had it that econ was the major that

made you look best to Wall Street and the investment banks. "We like economics majors," an investment banking recruiter reportedly said, "because they're people who're willing to sacrifice their educations to the interest of their careers."

The subjects that might threaten consumer cool, literary study in particular, had to adapt. They could offer diversion—it seems that's what I (and Freud) had been doing—or they could make themselves over to look more like the so-called hard, empirically based disciplines.

Here computers come in. Now that computers are everywhere, each area of enquiry in the humanities is more and more defined by the computer's resources. Computers are splendid research tools. Good. The curriculum turns in the direction of research. Professors don't ask students to try to write as Dickens would, experiment with thinking as he might, were he alive today. Rather, they research Dickens. They delve into his historical context; they learn what the newspapers were gossiping about on the day that the first installment of *Bleak House* hit the stands. We shape our tools, McLuhan said, and thereafter our tools shape us.

Many educated people in America seem persuaded that the computer is the most significant invention in human history. Those who do not master its intricacies are destined for a life of shame, poverty, and neglect. Thus more humanities courses are becoming computer-oriented, which keeps them safely in the realm of cool, financially negotiable endeavors. A professor teaching Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper," which depicts the exploitation of young boys whose lot is not altogether unlike the lot of many children living now in American inner cities, is likely to charge his students with using the computer to compile as much information about the poem as possible. They can find articles about chimney sweepers from 1790s newspapers; con-

temporary pictures and engravings that depict these unfortunate little creatures; critical articles that interpret the poem in a seemingly endless variety of ways; biographical information on Blake, with hints about events in his own boyhood that would have made chimney sweepers a special interest; portraits of the author at various stages of his life; maps of Blake's London. Together the class might create a Blake-Chimney Sweeper website: www.blakesweeper.edu.

Instead of spending class time wondering what the poem means, and what application it has to present-day experience, students compile information about it. They set the poem in its historical and critical context, showing first how the poem is the product and the property of the past—and, implicitly, how it really has nothing to do with the present except as an artful curiosity—and second how, given the number of ideas about it already available, adding more thoughts would be superfluous.

By putting a world of facts at the end of a key-stroke, computers have made facts, their command, their manipulation, their ordering, central to what now can qualify as humanistic education. The result is to suspend reflection about the differences among wisdom, knowledge, and information. Everything that can be accessed online can seem equal to everything else, no datum more important or more profound than any other. Thus the possibility presents itself that there really is no more wisdom; there is no more knowledge; there is only information. No thought is a challenge or an affront to what one currently believes.

Am I wrong to think that the kind of education on offer in the humanities now is in some measure an education for empire? The people who administer an empire need certain very precise capacities. They need to be adept technocrats. They need the kind of training that will allow them to take up

an abstract and unfelt relation to the world and its peoples—a cool relation, as it were. Otherwise, they won't be able to squeeze forth the world's wealth without suffering debilitating pains of conscience. And the denizen of the empire needs to be able to consume the kinds of pleasures that will augment his feeling of rightful rulership. Those pleasures must be self-inflating and not challenging; they need to confirm the current empowered state of the self and not challenge it. The easy pleasures of this nascent American empire, akin to the pleasures to be had in first-century Rome, reaffirm the right to mastery—and, correspondingly, the existence of a world teeming with potential vassals and exploitable wealth.

Immersed in preprofessionalism, swimming in entertainment, my students have been sealed off from the chance to call everything they've valued into question, to look at new ways of life, and to risk everything. For them, education is knowing and lordly spectatorship, never the Socratic dialogue about how one ought to live one's life.

These thoughts of mine didn't come with any anger at my students. For who was to blame them? They didn't create the consumer biosphere whose air was now their purest oxygen. They weren't the ones who should have pulled the plug on the TV or disabled the game port when they were kids. They hadn't invited the ad flaks and money changers into their public schools. What I felt was an ongoing sense of sorrow about their foreclosed possibilities. They seemed to lack chances that I, born far poorer than most of them, but into a different world, had abundantly enjoyed.

As I read those evaluation forms and thought them over, I recalled a story. In Vienna, there was once a superb teacher of music, very old. He accepted few students. There came to him once a young man whom all of Berlin was celebrating. Only

fourteen, yet he played exquisitely. The young man arrived in Austria hoping to study with the master. At the audition, he played to perfection; everyone surrounding the old teacher attested to the fact. When it came time to make his decision, the old man didn't hesitate. "I don't want him," he said. "But, master, why not?" asked a protégé. "He's the most gifted young violinist we've ever heard." "Maybe," said the old man. "But he lacks something, and without this thing real development is not possible. What that young man lacks is inexperience." It's a precious possession, inexperience; my students have had it stolen from them.

Cool School

BUT WHAT ABOUT the universities themselves? Do they do all they can to fight the reign of consumer cool?

From the start, the university's approach to students now has a solicitous, maybe even a servile tone. As soon as they enter their junior year in high school, and especially if they live in a prosperous zip code, the information materials, which is to say the advertising, come rolling in. Pictures, testimonials, videocassettes and CD-ROMs (some bidden, some not) arrive at the door from colleges across the country, all trying to capture the students and their tuition dollars.

The freshman-to-be sees photographs of well-appointed dorm rooms; of elaborate phys-ed facilities; of expertly maintained sports fields; of orchestras and drama troupes; of students working joyously, off by themselves. It's a retirement spread for the young. "Colleges don't have admissions offices anymore, they have marketing departments," a school financial officer said to me once. Is it surprising that someone who has been