

BOOK MATTERS

The
Changing
Nature of
Literacy

Alan Sica



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For
Anthony, Michael, Daniel
&
Penelope

The future of literacy



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Introduction: Distractions from the Printed Word

Printed Books and Electronic Gear

The persistent argument among disciplined readers concerning the best way to attain knowledge, with older partisans usually on one side and their more youthful counterparts to the other, once again heated up the cultural landscape about ten years ago. At that time the Google Corporation sent squads of workers to five of the largest academic libraries to begin a scanning project that promised to convert all printed works into more or less legible, more or less complete “digitized” renditions, suitable for reading on electronic devices. Loud and persistent criticism of the project, legal and substantive, has not stopped its momentum entirely, yet the notion of converting *all* the world’s books into this new form seems to have stalled. Meanwhile, in November 2007, Amazon began marketing its “Kindle” electronic reading device, and Barnes and Noble followed suit in 2009 with its “Nook.” Younger readers with sufficient funds, habituated to squinting at tiny screens on their cellular phone, adopted the new gadgets with the same alacrity that they have accepted every successive phone design offered by various firms. Some older readers were also pleased that they could transport their entire “library” with them in lightweight form.

Immediate cries of protest were heard, though, from publishers, copyright attorneys, and authors, who believed that such developments would kill the industry as it had functioned for at least two centuries. However, to date these complaints seem partly to have missed the mark, as printed books (along with vinyl phonograph records) have survived, and in some quarters even thrived. Still, the future of knowledge acquisition and dispersion remains foggy, with most prognostication pointing toward electronics rather than paper as the preferred “platform,” often as much for reasons of economy (for libraries, in particular) as for

scholarly motivations. Social and cultural change of this magnitude is never easy for those whose hearts are not warmed by such alterations, for example, Mark Twain's cantankerous denunciation of the telephone as a pitiless intruder into his quiet home—though it's true that he did embrace the new-fangled typewriter.

Why still read printed books on paper, especially those written some time ago, when the new world of electronic devices offers so much material on portable screens? Not only are millions of books available in pixelated (sometimes pixilated) form, but so, also, are an endless stream of other attractions and diversions. An excited friend and dedicated older reader of printed materials recently confided having spent only a few dollars for "all of Mark Twain," adapted for use on his electronic reader—thanks to Google's handing over to Barnes and Noble in 2014, the results of their scanning. He earnestly began reading his way through the large corpus without touching a printed book. When I pointed out that the proffered edition was cheap because it originated in the nineteenth century, therefore omitting a great deal (like most of Twain's letters and his complete autobiography), and that the editions he was reading were not entirely trustworthy, nor illustrated, he shrugged. "Still seems like a very good deal," he answered, which it surely is, not to mention his avoiding transport and storage of forty large volumes or so (e.g., *The Oxford Illustrated Mark Twain*). Although he made his way through a large proportion of the complete works, he eventually stalled in his quest to read "the complete" Mark Twain, which might say more about the inherent shortcomings of the technology to which he had entrusted these uniquely valuable works than about his own readerly energy. Perhaps his eyes were strained from reading the "Nook," or he missed the feeling and smell of "real" books.

A small genre of writing about printed books has arisen when various prompters asked important writers what they thought about books "in general" or as material objects as well as symbolic sites of meaning. One famous instance occurred in 1951 when John Steinbeck, a self-professed nonbibliophile who disliked fancy bindings and threw away dustcovers, probably surprised his interlocutor when asked to contribute to an American Institute of Graphic Arts volume called *The Author Looks at Format*. A small part of what he wrote has appeared on bookmarks and other inspirational settings:

The book itself took on its magical, sacrosanct and authoritative character at a time when there were very few books and

those [were] possessed by the very rich or the very learned. Then the book was the only release of the mind into distant places and into golden thinking. There was no other way of going outside one's self except through the talisman of the book. And it is wonderful that even today [1951] with all competition of records, of radio, of television, of motion pictures, the book has kept its precious character. A book is somehow sacred ... Messages come from behind the controlled and censored areas of the world and they do not ask for radios, for papers, and pamphlets. They invariably ask for books. They believe books when they believe nothing else. (Steinbeck, 2002: 170)

Wondering at the fact that dictators do not more often employ books as main propaganda tools owing to their obvious power to influence thought and behavior, Steinbeck avers that "it is the rarest of things for a man to destroy a book unless he truly hates it; book destruction is a kind of murder." Yet after this heroic Cold War rhetoric, he wisely pulls back a bit: "I wonder very much about the future of books. Can they continue to compete with the quick, cheap, easy forms which do not require either reading or thinking?" (ibid).

On April 27, 1972 a conference called "Do Books Matter?" organized by the Working Party on Library and Book Trade Relations, was held at the National Film Theatre (!) in London. Chairing the morning session was Queen Elizabeth's consort, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who said, "Books are the very stuff of civilization, and it seems almost indecent to be put in a position of having to defend them." But, he also noted that "There always has been, and there always will be, a large proportion of people to whom books do not matter. Fortunately, for them, the technologists have devised alternative methods of communication... But this doesn't mean that tapes and films have made books obsolescent—the contention is almost too ludicrous to be taken seriously... I believe that all these fascinating machines are complementary to, and not substitutes for, books and the printed word." From the point of view of a fifty-year old British aristocrat, from a noble family of book owners and readers, this prediction for the future of the book is, as it were, mandatory. That he was probably overstating the case for the imperishability of the book has in the ensuing forty-four years become very clear. Prince Philip went on: "It might, of course, be argued that these new methods will prevent the younger generation from ever getting into the habit of reading a book, or of discovering

the very real pleasure and excitement of exploring the special world of books. The answer to me is very simple, even though it may seem a bit patronising. The intelligent among them will inevitably discover that books are in a class by themselves. One book enjoyed is enough to unlock the door into the teahouse of knowledge and ideas, stretching in an unbroken line through the whole of human recorded history and thought. The essence of the book, unlike any other form of communication, is that it is a personal and cooperative experience between the reader and any author from any period of recorded history. That is why books matter to me” (Baumfield, 1973: 15–16).

Connecting Past and Present

Since 1933, on the ground floor of Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute, there has been displayed a gargantuan steam-powered locomotive which, when its “tender” is loaded with water and coal, weighs nearly 800,000 pounds. By comparison, a typical automobile today weighs about 3500 pounds, 0.004375 as much. Its ten drive wheels are each over five feet in diameter, designed to pull 12,800,000 pounds of freight. This famous engine, the Baldwin 60000—named for its production number in the company’s highly successful history—was the most advanced and “experimental” of its era. Yet despite its many innovations, its stupendous hauling capacity, and its top speed of 70 mph, the locomotive did not attract buyers, so was donated to the Institute only seven years after its construction. The mighty Baldwin Locomotive Works was bankrupt by 1972 because its diesel engines were not of the same stellar quality as the 70,000 steam and electric-driven engines, it had manufactured in rosier times. By the early 1950s, the huffing and puffing coal-powered locomotives—so central to the imagery of U.S. historical memory via popular culture—had become antiques in America (though not elsewhere), and their astonishing technological history, after a century of continual improvements in performance and size, was complete.

Just across a wide faux-Parisian boulevard from the Franklin Institute sits the Philadelphia Free Library, a massive beaux-arts building that was in development from 1911 to 1927. Inside its capacious environment its “patrons,” as they do in all libraries today, study small electronic screens, reading avidly about whatever comes to mind, including a great deal of current material unavailable in the Free Library’s antiquated holdings of 4.2 million catalogued items. If, by chance, these “readers” wished to peruse the largest collection of printed Beatrix Potter material outside

of Britain, or a similarly vast Charles Dickens collection, among other unique Free Library archives (like the manuscript of Joyce's *Ulysses*), they could do so simply by asking. But few ask, because not many visitors know who Potter was nor do they any longer read Dickens' lengthy novels—as their ancestors surely had done prior to his festive visits to Philadelphia in 1842 (when he met Edgar Allan Poe) and 1868, performing for the masses through passionate readings. He was mobbed just as, in relative scale, Pope Francis was recently received, in the same part of the city.

Dickens gave eight readings at Concert Hall in Philadelphia in January and February 1868, all the performances being sold out in hours. Between December 2 and April 20, he toured the eastern United States, delivering eighty-two dramatic readings, and ruining his health in the process. Like other visiting authors (William Thackeray and Oscar Wilde come to mind), he was adored by “the [literate] masses,” and accorded every hospitality then available—what is now called “the rock star treatment.” According to the *Philadelphia Gazette* of March 6, 1842, when the author was barely thirty years old, “Mr. Dickens will visit this city in a few days. He wisely declines all dinners, parades, shows, junketings, and things of that sort, preferring to meet such private unostentatious hospitalities as a courteous people should extend to any gentleman, and a stranger.” Yet he was followed around like royalty and shook hands with thousands of admiring readers.

The Baldwin 60000 Locomotive has sat motionless for eighty-three years, demonstrating by its stunning inertia, the unseemly nature of its grand pretensions to serve as the leading workhorse of the modern era. Likewise, the Free Library's collection of Dickensiana conveys a similar unspoken sentiment when what used to be called “literacy” is evaluated historically. Probably the most publicly appealing item in the entire Dickens archive is his pet raven, “Grip,” stuffed in 1841 and now “living” in Philadelphia. Dickens forbade any statues of himself to be erected after his death, thinking instead he should be remembered only by his work. That his pet raven's dusty corpse would stand in for himself as a treasured reminder of his writing probably did not occur to him when he died at fifty-eight in 1871 (nor that Philadelphia would “adopt” one of the few contemporary statues created of him, but coolly rejected by his descendants in Britain). His raven's honored position would have seemed too preposterous. But what at that time would likely have been regarded as “unthinkable”—that Dickens' oeuvre would eventually collect dust in second-hand bookstores, especially

those novels which have not yet been converted to film versions—has been obvious to bibliophiles for a good while, glancing as they do at complete sets of his novels and stories invariably perched high on bookstore shelves, out of reach.

After all, so say the champions of new media, since filmmakers have remade *Oliver Twist* no fewer than eleven times since 1922, *A Christmas Carol* six times, and *David Copperfield* thrice, why would modern culture-consumers be tempted to return to the printed originals? To propose, however politely, that there is an enormous qualitative difference between screened versions and the printed sources, each medium calling up distinct kinds of intelligent appreciation, has moved from being an orthodox complaint of fusty English professors to a claim made only by fringe Luddites lacking a sense of humor or hope for a brighter future. What's more, even a fast reader, which with Dickens is not to be recommended, would have to commit many an evening in absorbing *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*, not to mention *Little Dorrit*—the author's public reading of which brought tears to the toughest listeners. (The abbreviated filmed version lasts 7.5 hours.)

While it is still easy, mostly through paintings, to picture Victorian families reading aloud to each other from the latest installment of a Dickens novel, everything about that historically specific scene eludes today's home life: the blazing winter fireplace, members of the extended family circle attentively taking in the spoken word, the aural ability to follow Dickens' complex sentence structure, his myriad characters, his passionate political arguments, and his humor. Recalling his fame for those readers who waited hours just to glimpse him in person can only be explained by the overpowering emotional appeal that his characters and their stories made upon the mid-nineteenth century consciousness. Joseph Epstein, while writing "Whatever Happened to High Culture?," asked his friend Samuel Lipman (pianist, classical music critic, and neoconservative highbrow journalist) his opinion of popular culture, and he calmly replied "I consider movies and television dog shit" (Epstein, 2015). One wonders if Dickens, upon seeing his novels converted to film, would have agreed. It would be intriguing to ask Walter Scott, Hugo, Dumas, Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy, Thackeray, Austen, the Brontes, Twain, and so many others, how filmed adaptations of their novels and stories compare with the originals when viewed by the authors themselves.

Naturally, the very names "Huck Finn," "Anna Karenina," or "Hawkeye" have international currency more for their filmed presences than from

the books that initially created them. Yet the nagging question remains: what relationship exists between a two-hour movie viewing and a 50-hour reading? That they are “good in different ways” is obvious; that they are both treasured by their aficionados is also plain; but their relative ultimate value to their consumers, even as film has triumphed in sheerly quantitative terms, remains a puzzle over which a great many words, printed and otherwise, have been expended. That it was easier and “more fun” to read a cartoon summary of *The Three Musketeers* was discovered long ago by youngsters forced to write a book review of Dumas’ masterpiece, while lacking the time or motivation to study the book itself, even in translation. Their teachers, of course, viewed any popularized précis as a sacrilege, yet now “graphic novels” are studied as “serious” literature, and in many quarters, the distinction between the cartoon and printed works that was fundamental to sorting “high culture” from “mass culture” has vanished. Is this “democratization of culture” (as Karl Mannheim named it in 1920s Weimar) good for “culture,” for readers, for weighty texts, for “thought”? It is impolite to argue against it, not to mention a likely waste of breath.

Historians of literacy often refer to St. Augustine’s memory (*Confessions*, VI:3; 397–398 CE) of his beloved teacher, St. Ambrose, quietly reading to himself, even as people gathered around him, anxious to hear him speak about religious or secular matters since he was the Bishop of Milan, and an important theologian as well. But then, like now, finding time to read in peace did not come easily:

When he was not with them [supplicants], which was never for very long at a time, he was refreshing his mind with reading. When he read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart explored the meaning, but his voice was silent, and his tongue was still. All could approach him freely, and it was not usual for visitors to be announced, so that often, when we came to see him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud. We would sit there quietly, for no one had the heart to disturb him when he was so engrossed in study. After a time we went away again, guessing that in the short time when he was free from the turmoil of other mens’ affairs and was able to refresh his own mind, he would not wish to be distracted. Perhaps he was afraid that, if he read aloud, some obscure passage in the author he was reading might raise a question in the mind of an attentive listener, and he would then have to explain the

meaning or even discuss some of the more difficult points. If he spent his time in this way, he would not manage to read as much as he wished. Perhaps a more likely reason why he read to himself was that he needed to spare his voice, which quite easily became hoarse. But whatever his reason, we may be sure it was a good one. (Augustine, 1961: 114)

Much has been made of Ambrose's refusal to read aloud as if it were a shocking innovation, yet some scholars point out that silent reading was already well established by the time Augustine noticed the Bishop of Milan quietly absorbing printed material. Ever since books became widely available in sixteenth century Europe, treatises about their "proper" uses have become part of literacy's history.

One of the most famous meditations about using books wisely is recorded in Montaigne's various works, especially his *Essays*, composed after he retired from public life in 1571 to his library of "a thousand volumes." This private sanctum lay in the third floor of a tower (now a museum) about "sixteen paces" in diameter, filled with "shelves curving in rows five feet high, so that with one glance I can see all my thousand books." He did not ape Petrarch, Erasmus, and other luminaries of the early modern period by worshiping his books as such, prizing them above all other preciousities. In fact, poking gentle fun at the earlier humanists, he notes that he never read for more than one hour in succession (except when he had in hand Tacitus, whose histories were for him page-turners), and "I am never there [in the library] at night." He postures in a studied casualness regarding his books, preferring older ones to those of his own period, and claiming that it was enough simply to own his books, which awaited his occasional glimpses, rather than boring deeply into them to the exclusion of doing other more normal things.

However, he also says "My library is my kingdom, and here I try to make my rule absolute—shutting off this single nook [!!] from wife, daughter, and society." Furthermore, books "relieve me from idleness, recuse me from company I dislike, and blunt the edge of my grief, if it is not too extreme. They are the comfort and solitude of my old age. When I am attacked by gloomy thoughts, nothing helps me so much as running to my books. They quietly absorb me and banish the clouds from my mind" (Montaigne, 1935: 97–99). As in so many other instances throughout his compendious *Essays*, Montaigne managed to anticipate many of the joys and sorrows attendant to "modern" life, and

all from the comfort of his library. Unlike Erasmus and other notables of the time who regularly moved throughout Europe from palace to library to palace, Montaigne after the age of thirty-eight preferred to remain near his own estate, leaving only briefly to secure medical treatment. He was able to accomplish his cosmopolitan feat of wise composition by drawing on the wisdom stored in his very large private library (by the standards of the time), even as he mocked his own dedication and dependence upon it for happiness and edification. Yet he displayed a relaxed, almost childlike understanding of reading: "I do not bite my nails over the difficulties I encounter in a book. After one or two assaults, I give them up. If I kept at them, I would only lose my time and myself as well. If one book wearies me, I quickly pick up another" (ibid, 101). As a former soldier, he did not wish to be viewed by his audience as the bookworm he surely had become, a sense of self common to addicted readers, one foot in the "real" world, the other stuck firmly among book-bound phantasms.

Herman Melville also understood the strained dialectic between the adventurer and the sedate writer when each role conjoins in a single person. After spending years traveling on land and sea in search of a livelihood, in his late twenties, Melville became part of a literary set run by the publisher Evert Duyckinck, owner of a large private library to which Melville for the first time had access. His global travels mixed with a new literary sense thereby acquired inflamed his imagination, which propelled him to write five novels quickly, culminating in *Moby Dick*. He had bought a farm with borrowed money in western Massachusetts near his uneasy friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, and swiftly finished his great whale book at the age of thirty-one. It was exuberant to a degree unknown to that point in American literature, and equalled only by the British writer, Laurence Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy*. While cultivating "the Art of Telling the Truth," Melville's prose far exceeded the normal imaginative limitations of American and British readers, and directly reflects the influences he had absorbed while borrowing books from Duyckinck's library. This is evidenced in Chapter 104 from *Moby Dick*:

One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan,

they weary me and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it. (Melville, 1964: 580)

This novel, like nearly all of Melville's eight others, sold poorly and did not bring him artistic recognition, such that by 1891 when he died, he was known only as the Deputy Inspector of Customs in New York City. He was finally redefined in the 1920s as a great American writer by Lewis Mumford and others, and has since become canonical. As a boy he learned the Bible, the influence of which is strong throughout *Moby Dick*, and also partook of *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy*. He also became familiar with Montaigne's *Essays*, Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and other compendia of strange facts and tales. However, the definitive change in his outlook and creativity came only after he began to study Shakespeare, about a year prior to writing the novel. From "the divine William" he learned about "black truth" as revealed in the tragic heroes: Hamlet, Lear, Timon, and Iago (ibid., xviii–xix). Had Melville not had access to Mr. Duyckinck's library, and regular literary conversation with Hawthorne and other writers, it is unlikely given his cultural background and brief formal education that he would have been either motivated or capable of writing the extraordinary works he created between 1845 and 1857. In this mere twelve-year slice of his seventy-two on earth, his output was astonishing, and had he written nothing but "Bartleby the Scrivener," he would have found a place in the history of U.S. literature. Melville was a self-created, iconoclastic genius of a distinctly American type whose achievements rested on whichever important books he could "beg, borrow, or steal" (his funds always being very short)—another instance of talent meeting literary sources and thereby making high art.

The list of books about reading, books as material objects, libraries as special places, ethical and cognitive "uplift" owed to books, the history of literacy, and related topics is vast, the content of which would fill a large library itself. Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading* (1996)

represents the genre well, especially since he has long-championed reading as a vital and necessary human activity. Yet “ironically” (to use the reigning term of cultural analysis), just as book reading has become seriously threatened by the many electronic alternatives, a slew of new titles has appeared promoting the old-fashioned approach to learning and thought. *Why Read Moby Dick?* (Philbrick, 2011) is apt in the current context, as is *Why I Read: The Serious Pleasure of Books* (Lesser, 2014), *Why Read?* (Edmundson, 2004), and *A Reader on Reading* (Manguel, 2010), which ends with the Montaigne-like chapter “The Library as Home,” followed disturbingly by “The End of Reading.” If it seemed absurd to Prince Philip in 1972 that printed books would one day become unnecessary and unloved, today’s defensive bibliophiles do not share his confidence. Writing books that are likely to be read only by other committed readers who already share their passionate attachment to the printed page, they have trumpeted their message as loudly as a book title can: *This is Not the End of the Book* (Carrière and Eco, 2011), *Leave Me Alone, I’m Reading: Finding and Losing Myself in Books* (Corrigan, 2005), *The Committed Reader: Reading for Utility, Pleasure, and Fulfillment in the Twenty-First Century* (Stebbins, 2013), *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (Jacobs, 2011), and *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (Mikics, 2013), all of which transmit almost identical messages, but in different voices. All are in a way ancillaries to Jean-Paul Sartre’s postwar classic, *What is Literature?* wherein he asks “What is Writing,” “Why Write?,” “For Whom Does One Write?,” and “The Situation of the Writer in 1947” (Sartre, 1949). His question was existentially connected to war, asking if there was still a place for something so bourgeois as the consumption of “literature” following a global bloodbath of such magnitude. But he did not ask if “the book” was finished as a cultural device. Such a question would not have occurred to him.

The new genre of “Saving the Book” will surely exhaust itself eventually, but meanwhile has provided shelf-space for many recent volumes, some of them by famous writers attempting to defend their livelihoods and cultural home, others composed by academics with a somewhat more removed view, since they by and large are not dependent on their tiny royalties for financial survival. Some broadcast dark forebodings such as *The End of Reading: From Gutenberg to Grand Theft Auto* (Trend, 2010) and *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (Hedges, 2009). Others take a more whimsical approach, hinting that “books as fun,” like *Browsings: A Year of Reading*,

Collecting, and Living with Books (Dirda, 2015), *The Year of Reading Dangerously: How Fifty Great Books Saved My Life* (Miller, 2014), *Where I'm Reading From: The Changing World of Books* (Parks, 2015), *So Many Books, So Little Time: A Year of Passionate Reading* (Nelson, 2003), and *So Many Books: Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance* (Zaid, 2003).

For a person to spend “an entire year” in the virtuous pursuit of reading valuable material would not have seemed strange to Thomas Jefferson, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, or Ezra Pound, not to mention their countless literate contemporaries. It becomes noteworthy only in a society which has, for the most part, given up reading for the simpler pleasures of viewing images. This small counter-movement among serious readers was given a boost twenty years ago when Phyllis Rose published *The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time* (Rose, 1997). The happy notion that a determined reader could “finally” get to a classic, everyone knows by title but very few have studied throughout seemed to open the door for other writers. The socio-literary question, of course, would be if Rose’s books and others like hers have inspired lay-readers to pursue difficult and lengthy works—Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in John Bagnell Bury’s seven-volume edition is often mentioned in this context—or if instead they simply read about the experience of authors who claim to have “gone the distance,” not unlike watching travel videos rather than making the “actual” trip.

There are also within this publishing zone more sober treatments, somewhat academic in nature, which debate the continued utility and attraction of books as they are surrounded by “virtual” presences that do not rely on paper or publishers. Robert Darnton, famous historian and Harvard’s university librarian, has often written quite positively about the digitized future, yet in *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (Darnton, 2010), he includes concluding chapters on “A Paean to Paper” and “The Mysteries of Reading,” almost as if he is remembering his own past via this “unashamed apology for the printed word” (ibid., vii). English professor emerita Patricia Meyer Spacks in her retirement spent a year rereading books from her youth and after, wondering why people return to favorites rather than investigating newer material (*On Rereading*, 2011). Hers is a distinctly old-fashioned trot through Jane Austen up to the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which to younger scholars might seem Quixotic in that they have not yet read enough important books to be enticed back for a second examination. The Canadian professor of German, Andrew Piper, offered *Book Was*

There: Reading in Electronic Times (2012) while Aaron Lansky, barely twenty-three years old, decided to preserve Jewish and Yiddish cultures threatened with extinction by collecting books destined to be discarded (*Outwitting History: How a Young Man Rescued a Million Books and Saved a Vanishing Civilization*, 2006). This heroic bibliophilia is as rare as it is strange in today's world, when even academic libraries routinely throw out any book that is not "carrying its weight" in patron usage (as measured by computerized circulation records, of course).

At the edges of this discussion are trade books of the "how-to" variety which assert hopefully that the book continues to hold its own in today's cultural environment, like *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration* (Keller, 2014) and *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (Pariser, 2012). Perhaps imitating the "slow food" movement begun in Italy, which prescribes long and relaxed dining for an improved life, *The Slow Book Revolution: Creating a Culture of Reading on College Campuses and Beyond* (Lacy, 2014) hopes to do similarly good things for collegiate readers, those who still exist.

If such popularizations of this vital topic do not fit the bill, there are now online companies that promote "literacy" among youngsters in formal school settings. One, based in Florida, blankets putatively potential customers with emails filled with rhetoric of the kind usually reserved for television commercials: "Discover fun, new ways to improve literacy." This firm offers an online "conference" set up in thirty-minute segments regarding "new strategies for incorporating technology into reading instruction; creative ways to use tablets and mobile apps in the classroom; ten free and easy-to-use web tools to promote literacy; free comic creation tools that help improve literacy; tools for implementing digital storytelling in the elementary grades." Perhaps a comic book version of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, massively abridged for younger readers, and sent to their phones with suitably accompanying dance routines will eventually be sold as an enticement to "literacy."

Virtuoso Reading

If such books written for relatively wide audiences promote book-reading as pleasant, uplifting, enchanting, health-promoting, and wise, there are other notable approaches to the act that do not lay down the red carpet so much as instill dread into most prospective participants. They hint strongly at the difference between amateurs playing a few

chords on the guitar versus Andrés Segovia or Julian Bream performing Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas for Violin* transcribed for their instrument. Even gifted amateurs need not apply. This is not the "mass culture" first analyzed, even celebrated, by sociologists in the 1950s, nor the "democratization of culture" that fascinated Karl Mannheim, György Lukács, and T. S. Eliot in the 1920s and 1930s, with its threatening and sympathetic connection to fascist propaganda.

One of the leading recent virtuosi of reading nontrivial texts was Vladimir Nabokov, known generally and distortingly only for *Lolita*, mainly via the two filmed versions. In *Lectures on Literature* (1980) he assesses Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Dickens' *Bleak House*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Stevenson's "*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*," Proust's *The Walk by Swann's Place (Swann's Way)*, Kafka's "*The Metamorphosis*," and Joyce's *Ulysses*, all within 370 pages. Austen, Dickens, and Proust receive the longest treatments. In addition, in *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981), his eye turns toward Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevski (three novels and a novella in 140 pages), Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gorki, a virtual course in the nineteenth century Russian "greats." (He also lectured on sixteen other Russian writers, most importantly Pushkin [Nabokov, 1981: viii, note]). His *Lectures on Don Quixote* (1984) were also published, an entire book dedicated to a single, if very long, work. None of these priceless documents would exist had Nabokov been able to survive financially solely on the strength of his highbrow fiction, prior to the liberating windfall garnered by *Lolita*. They are his lecture and exam notes: he "fortunately took the trouble of writing [between May 1940 and summer, 1941] one hundred lectures—about 2000 pages—on Russian literature. This kept me happy at Wellesley and Cornell for twenty academic years" (Nabokov, 1981: vii). Each lecture was timed at precisely fifty minutes.

Not infrequently Nabokov was a practiced contrarian regarding literature, and particularly that composed by Russians, who he once calculated had produced "only" 23,000 printed pages of top-flight material *in toto* (ibid., 1), a tidy bunch and far smaller in scope than, say, English literature. Whereas every American and English reader and fellow writer in the twentieth century learned everything they knew about the Russian classics from Constance Garnett's comprehensive translations, Nabokov took every opportunity to undercut her work. Whereas in the 1950s literary critics, especially in Britain, were beginning to probe serious fiction for its historical and sociological truth-telling, Nabokov insisted that such trivializing was distinctly

“philistine” and had little to do with writers intentions or interests. He argued bitterly and famously with his good friend, Edmund Wilson, over the proper translation of Pushkin, giving rise to yet another book (Karlinsky, 1979: 41–60, 67–85, *passim*). He was, of course, a displaced Russian aristocrat who, had the Bolsheviks not made him unwelcome, and had his wife, Vera, not protected him from everyday life, may never have become the great writer (and lepidopterist) we know.

The editors of Nabokov’s posthumously published classroom performances open his *Lectures on Literature* with “Good Readers and Good Writers,” Professor Nabokov’s way of persuading his Wellesley and Cornell students, mostly women, to rethink their presumed approach to great fiction. He sets the tone by quoting Flaubert’s letter to his mistress (in French, of course) which translates as “What a scholar one might be if one knew well only some half a dozen books” (Nabokov, 1980: 1). This is hermeneutics that hovers in the stratosphere. In contrast, today’s doctoral student is theoretically expected to have read “carefully” scores of sources prior to writing the dissertation, thereby sticking very close to the ground. Imaginative flights are vigorously discouraged. He continues, “In reading, one should notice and fondle details.” Nabokov detested analyses that sought socioeconomic-political “information” from fiction: “Nothing is more boring or more unfair to the author than starting to read, say, *Madame Bovary*, with the preconceived notion that it is a denunciation of the bourgeoisie.” Nabokov’s method of hermeneutic analysis sticks to the work itself, *die Sache selbst*, giving it as much autonomous meaning as possible: “the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection *with the worlds we already know*” (ibid., emphases added).

With the final clause Nabokov vigorously strides away from the socioliterary analysis of Raymond Williams and his many followers, for whom Dickens and Thackeray were not so much creators of fictional worlds as factual reporters from the past century. Readers of merit, according to Nabokov, rank such work considerably below the acceptable minimum bar when attempting to understand literature, that is, truly worth reading. To accuse Nabokov of “elitism” would have coincided precisely with his self-conception. For him reading is a sacramental act, one not easily practiced, nor necessary for ordinary life. As Prince Philip noted in his remarks quoted above, many people will never esteem or honor books, nor feel compelled to read them

outside of formal schooling, which he took to be a natural condition of humanity. Nabokov surely agreed, yet he insisted that if one *were* to study canonical writing, there was no easy path up the mountain.

For his students he offered a mixed list of desirable and irrelevant characteristics that he thought fundamental to good readership. Minimum requirements were “imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense.” He also voiced what has become a truism for the most dedicated and experienced readers: “one cannot *read* a book; one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader” (ibid., 3). He stretches the boundaries of what modern users of printed material might think sane: “at a second, or third, or fourth reading, we do, in a sense, behave toward a book as we do toward a painting... the authentic instrument to be used by the reader... is impersonal imagination and artistic delight... The color of Fanny Price’s eyes in *Mansfield Park* and the furnishing of her cold little room are important.” And speaking from experience, he adds that writers are storytellers, teachers, and enchanters, “but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer” (ibid., 4–5).

Nabokov’s earnest dedication to the art of writing, especially during those decades when his income from novels was very small, fits neatly with his deeply artistic method of reading. When he defined “philistines and philistinism” as “a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group and time... [with a child of theirs becoming] a small parrot mimicking the ways of confirmed vulgarians,” he was fuming against the post-war consumer bingeing of the 1950s when art-for-itself seemed to have fled the cultural scene. “Russians have, or had, a special name for smug philistinism—*poshlust* ... —not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive” (Nabokov, 1984: 309, 313).

Thus, for Nabokov, one key way of avoiding the vulgar common placement, the “alienated life,” symptomatic of what John Kenneth Galbraith called, with disdain, “the affluent society,” was to continue engaging in serious reading along the lines he gave to his students. He did not offer through these mental applications any special enlightenment or self-improvement or improved interpersonal dynamics. Rather, he argued that sustained and inexhaustible hermeneutics practiced upon “great books” would yield a clearer understanding of what the authors achieved aesthetically—a more than adequate reward

for the labors expended. The point was to learn how to interact with a creative mind presumably finer than one's own, in a way that apprentice musicians study the score of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* in astonishment, wondering how such a work could have been written by a deaf man in 1827. Put another way, if George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is, in fact, the finest nineteenth century novel in English, as so many authorities now claim, how did Mary Ann Evans create it, and what did she intend by doing so? Similarly, if Marx's *Grundrisse* is the "grounding" of *Das Kapital*, does it not require intense scrutiny by those who wish to understand the creation of the Marxian worldview?

This brings up the important question that did not trouble Nabokov, nor his colleagues in the Serious Literature Business. While every educated person in the West knows, through repeated insistence by their teachers, that Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Milton, and a few others are above reproach in terms of our shared heritage, and that their writings merit "slow reading," this is not the case for writers in the "human science" tradition. In a culture which is charmed by the expression "just give me the bottom line," time and the patient energy required for analyzing *The Wealth of Nations* or *The Phenomenology of Mind* or William James' *The Principles of Psychology* or Weber's *Economy and Society* is not made available to any but a tiny group of monkish graduate students who have sacrificed their "free time" (Adorno's commentary on this concept is apt) and their interpersonal normalcy in order to "plumb the depths" of such works. If summary assessments of canonical creations prevail as common currency—"Keynes proved that governments must indulge in deficits to sustain capitalist economies"—then why "waste" one's scarce resources in pursuing them, giving them the two, three, or four readings that Nabokov proclaimed were necessary to comprehend the likes of Jane Austen or Dostoevski? As the old saw holds, "physicists do not study the history of physics, so why should social scientists study, for example, Montesquieu on law or Durkheim on social cohesion?" This query becomes ever less a rhetorical device, and instead a simple statement of received wisdom, the more encompassing of culture at large that Twitterdom becomes.

Long before the most recent meditations on reading and books appeared, Ernst Robert Curtius offered what is now a standard snapshot history of "The Book as Symbol," where he observes that "in ancient Greece there is hardly any idea of the sacredness of the book, as there is no privileged priestly caste of scribes" (Curtius, 1953: 304). Moreover, "pleasure in beautiful books" finally arose with Catullus

(84–54 BCE), for “he was not merely a genius. He knew books and he reflected deeply about his art” (Wheeler, 1934: 2). Working in the same tradition as Curtius, George Steiner has for decades written innovatively about literacy of a high order, and the price a civilization pays when its role is diminished, or even abrogated. One of his earliest broadsides along these lines appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1970, entitled “In a Post-Culture” (Steiner, 1976: 155–171), where he swiftly surveys the rise and fall of concerted literacy “from Montaigne to Mallarmé.” Growing up using three languages fluently, in which even as an adult he regularly dreams, his worldview was intensely literate and theoretical, not unlike the cultural atmosphere imbibed by Kafka, Lukács, Karl Kraus, Robert Musil, and their compatriots in early twentieth-century Central Europe.

Steiner at forty-three was invited to join Prince Philip, Marshall McLuhan, and three other notables at the “Do Books Matter?” symposium held, as mentioned before, at the National Film Theatre in London in April 1972. He had quite a lot to say. “The question we are asking is, I fully agree with you, scandalous. We ask a great deal about disaster just now, and the end of things, and the collapse of institutions” (Baumfield, 1973: 17), signifying that reading books is one of those threatened institutions, and among the most important. Surprisingly, he calls upon sociology: “The classic age of reading may not have lasted very long. What do we mean by the classic age? We mean certain conditions that surround the private reader. Here again, we need help from the sociologists, and until now we haven’t got it.” The desired sociological component concerns relations of power and privilege, of course: “There is a zone around the classic reader, and this is above all a zone of silence... in the *cabinet de lecture*, in the reader’s room, there is silence” (ibid., 18). Where today is there the silence Steiner advocates, even requires, for reading that is worthy of the name? Surely not in public transit, nor retail formats, nor sporting events, nor physicians’ offices, nor elevators, nor almost any urban setting—not even in libraries, where the librarians’ “shushing” of patrons has become an antiquated joke. It would seem to be available only in large homes at some distance from other large homes, and in a few, increasingly rare inner sancta of academic libraries.

The notion of an American reader sequestered in a quiet forest in order to read and think invariably recalls Henry David Thoreau, even if in fact he spent relatively little untrammelled time at Walden Pond in isolated study (July 4, 1845 to September 6, 1847; Thoreau, 1986: 1046). He did, however, very much prize his small private library, and after

receiving a stunning gift of forty volumes concerning Asian culture (so says his biographer), these “new books could still nourish his habitual circling and widening reading habits. Claude Levi-Strauss described his own study habits as ‘the intellectual equivalent of slash-and-burn agriculture.’ Thoreau worked very differently, returning often to favorite texts, finding renewal and fresh insight on the oldest, most familiar ground” (Richardson, 1986: 337). Nabokov’s insistence on multiple readings was apparently anticipated by this iconic American author, in addition to many other practiced students of texts.

Dozens of paintings that memorialize great readers of the past, like St. Jerome, Erasmus, and Petrarch, always assert by pictorial representation an otherworldly setting as necessary for their labors. In addition, their faces may seem beatific but are never cheerily celebratory. After all, the “private reader” is by historical definition a sociological freak, and perhaps never more so than today. While Ho Chi Minh, son of a Confucian intellectual, was studying politics in Paris (1919–1923), his illiterate countrymen were carrying out subsistence farming, barely scraping by, under foreign domination. Other modern revolutionary thinkers and actors shared “Uncle Ho’s” luxurious access to inspiring and informative printed materials, such as Trotsky, Lenin, and Mao. Fidel Castro studied law at Columbia University before taking over Cuba, and his friend, Che Guevara, was a physician. These were super-literate political actors, for indeed revolutionaries are readers, as the powers-that-be have long known ever since Martin Luther. There is a strong socio-economic and cultural confection that makes reading possible, as they all realized, and providing opportunities for their oppressed countrymen also to enjoy the privilege of literacy, and the materials and social space required to achieve it, bolstered their revolutionary fervor.

George Steiner makes this very clear, and in doing so answers his own sociological question:

There is a silence guaranteed by a caste system, even as the cleaning of the library, the brushing of the backs of the volumes, the oiling of the spine, is done by the servant in the classic age, when he is called in to the library. There is a whole very complicated network of relations, of economic power and control which surround this figure whom we see in so many paintings, etchings, and engravings of the eighteenth century, *le liseur*, *la liseuse*, who in luxury and in silence and privacy are sitting reading a book which they own, surrounded

by the quietness, the enforced quietness of their household.
(Baumfield, 1973: 18–19)

This seldom-mentioned aspect of social structure was also connected to the political identity of both the commoners, as it were, and their aristocratic “betters,” well-expressed in this ordinary sentiment of the pre-democratic period in Europe and America: “The man who has a library is among those who have the right to govern us” (ibid., 21). The fact that this notion is antiquated Steiner fully understands: “The private library is an anomaly which is passing more and more from us: a rare act of luxury. One is almost embarrassed to possess one. The collection of books for a personal library is again far more than an act of taste or even of economic inclination: it is a whole *sociology of the spirit*” (ibid., 23–24; emphases added).

The fact that a “sociology of the spirit” remains undefined does not bother Steiner, nor those who sympathize with his vaunted view of sustained literacy. And without any apologetic hesitation, he elaborates on Nabokov’s “elitist” view of reading and the artistic writing that makes it possible: “*True reading* is a very difficult business, and it is now made much more difficult for us by the almost total disappearance of the kind of available literacy assumed by the European educated public until, let us say, the early part of this century. So much of current education, and this is beginning to be true even in this country, is *organised amnesia*” (ibid., 29; emphases added in part). Steiner concludes his remarks before the learned symposium in London, by reverting, in part, to a chestnut of American cultural history:

One remembers, quite unashamedly, though romantically, accounts of Lincoln’s walks, eight or nine miles in winter weather, because he had heard that a classic was available in another town. Or Carlyle’s accounts of those enormous walks of his, in search of one or two books which he heard might be available... Or Erasmus at the beginning of our classic age of reading, telling how on a stormy night, coming home, he saw something unfamiliar in the mud at his feet, and stopped to pick it up. It was a piece of print. He stood there, holding this thing, shaking with joy at the wonder of it. (ibid., 30)

In the celebrated 1986 essay, “Real Presences,” Steiner wonders if, after reconsulting Virginia Woolf’s “common reader,” F. R. Leavis’