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Paradox of the Book

The chaos of the Internet makes reading easier.

Oct 21, 2013, Vol. 19, No. 07 • By THOMAS L. JEFFERS

Plato is smarter than you. That's how an experienced teacher once began a series of lectures on the Greek philosopher. And a good beginning it was, for it put students on notice that, as they read, their first duty was to attend and learn. Plato didn't have the final word—there would be Aristotle, Epicurus, and others—but no one could enter that ancient conversation without conning the books.



Theodore Roosevelt and friends, 1905
AP

Same with us, only we have a problem: Compared even with people half-a-generation back, we lack the necessary time and patience. We read plenty, but it's mostly skimming online news and compressed Twitter or Facebook messages. What's needed, David Mikics argues, is a return to the close-reading practices inculcated by teachers whose influence might be said to have peaked in the 1950s and declined in the late '60s, with the shift to a politicized pedagogy. That shift changed the game, and many English departments now prefer the label "cultural studies," not least because it allows them to jettison traditional poems and stories for the sake of TV, hip-hop, fashion ads, graphic novels, and comic books—whatever

facilitates (as in "makes facile") sloganizing about gender, race, and class.

Plato isn't the smartest anymore. That title has passed to the trendy professor hectoring from the lectern or bloviating on his blog. Which goes a long way toward explaining why the English major, once the flagship of the humanities in our colleges, may soon be of interest only to archaeologists. In 1971, 7.6 percent of undergraduates majored in English; today it's 3.1 percent.

One reaction is to rejoice, for the reading and writing of literature can now go back to where it thrived, before the advent of criticism as an academic discipline in the 1920s and '30s. Till then, English departments, if they existed at all, innocently taught philology and hard-fact literary history. Inspired by the dazzling analyses of I. A. Richards and William Empson, not to mention the smartly diverging discriminations of writer-critics like T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, professors like F. R. Leavis, Yvor Winters, and Lionel Trilling made "English" the go-to place for many of the best undergraduate minds. But that, even for today's middle-aged teachers, was almost inconceivably long ago.

For all of us, but especially for Generation X and Y sorts, a sustained and quiet read is harder to get than ever. The nagging, omnipresent digital media have produced a version of the Attention

Deficit Disorder that psychologists began identifying in children decades ago: Continuous Partial Attention (CPA). A former Apple employee, Linda Stone, coined the term in 1998, differentiating it from multitasking, or the pairing of a “fairly automatic” activity, such as eating lunch, with one requiring concentration, such as making a phone call. CPA results from “a desire not to miss anything,” to be plugged into sources keeping us “in the know” and, artificially, at high alert. Between smartphone, laptop, e-reader, Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube, says novelist Walter Kirn, we’re like the “stiff-backed lady operators” in old movies, “rapidly swapping phone jacks from hole to hole as they connect Chicago to Miami, reporter to city desk, businessman to mistress.”

As the slow-food movement has tried to refine our fast-food habits, so (Mikics believes) a slow-reading movement might correct CPA’s neurotic mix of “over-stimulation and lack of fulfillment.” He would have us concentrate on one book at a time, and with the web’s ever-exploding “library” blacked out. The blackout can be achieved, I was delighted to learn, through something called the Freedom app, which allows one at the keyboard to focus on his or her word processor, and nothing else—the digital equivalent, Mikics suggests, to maintaining celibacy at an orgy.

Mikics locates the origin of word-by-word analysis at Harvard, where, in the 1950s, Reuben Brower taught a humanities course that spawned a large number of future English professors. Through the work of Trilling at Columbia, complementing Leavis at Cambridge—the moral imagination joined with the rigors of close reading—criticism became a formidable subject indeed. Rather than offering what Brower pooh-poohed as “the old-time appreciation course in which the teacher mounted the platform and sang a rhapsody which he alone was capable of understanding and which the student memorized,” the postwar cohort of literature teachers presented the text as an aesthetic and ethical nut to crack.

Those code-crackers insisted that literature qua literature does not illustrate ideologies, historical events, or even moral ideas—though of course they are all in play. A literary work is, like a living person, a complicated and ambivalent organism: We have to live with it awhile if we hope to comprehend it properly. The cultural studies squad certainly doesn’t sweat the complications and scarcely bothers with the particular words. It just asks students to grasp the salient points, usually regarding who, in a given setting, is oppressing whom.

Of course, it’s smart to know who’s oppressing whom: It enables us to survive and, possibly, to help others do the same. But as Harold Bloom says, the best books offer something prior: self-knowledge. By discovering what authors think, feel, and care for, we find out who *they* are. By entering into dialogue with their books—annotating in the margins when we agree or disagree or when we aren’t sure—we define who *we* are.

So far, you might say, so school-master-ish. There’s more than a trace of the self-help book in *Slow Reading*, which comes complete with 14 rules—from “Be Patient” to “Identify Signposts” to “Find Another Book”—that promise to fix what’s broken in our mental and emotional life. But this is entirely forgivable, given the impoverishment that, without enough slow reading, so many of us suffer. And as slow readers of great books, we take away not just trivia for *Jeopardy!* It’s what Elizabeth Bowen said of the books she read as a child, which provided a feeling for

“incalculable” characters: “It appeared that nobody who mattered was capable of being explained. Thus was inculcated a feeling for the dark horse.”

Literature presents not only characters but ideas that are “dark” (i.e., richly ambiguous), such that interpretation can be edifyingly difficult. Mikics shows how key words in the works of philosophical writers such as Machiavelli (*virtù* and *fortuna*) and Edmund Burke (“rational liberty”) are contested and qualified in ways that, as their meanings unfold, require the reader to do a lot of the work: apprehending what’s on one page, and connecting it with similar and dissimilar statements on other pages.

There’s nothing flagrantly amiss in Mikics’s formulations of the pagan, Christian, Romantic, or modernist themes explored in works by Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, Blake, Yeats, Chekhov, Philip Roth, and others. But the more I reread his two-to-four-page summations, the more I felt that, like many of us, he’s seduced by a professorial fondness for verbal solutions—nuggets of interpretive wisdom that can seem all right as we stand above a great poem, play, or novel, but that evanesce as we descend to details.

Mikics offers sound synopses of a number of predictable classic works as well as, happily, some unexpected ones—Lawrence’s “Fragment of Stained Glass” and Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, for instance. His hope is that, stimulated by his aperçus, we will find these works for ourselves and, after careful study, will return to *Slow Reading* to review and debate his commentary.

Good luck with that. A better strategy is followed by Francine Prose in *Reading Like a Writer* (2006). She reprints long extracts from fiction that illustrate most of Mikics’s common-sense principles (“Identify the Voice,” “Notice Beginnings and Endings”) and that get us far enough into the works to make us feel we’re truly *reading* them. The motivation to finish the job is strong. But the best strategy, surely, was pursued by classic textbooks, such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* or Trilling’s *The Experience of Literature*, which present full texts and thorough—often up to half-a-dozen-page—critiques, the utility of which, shown time and again in midcentury classrooms, was to enable students to proceed to “do things with texts” quite on their own, thanks.

This is precisely what we should want. The groves of academe are now a brownfield, and it will take a generation, maybe more, for them to grow green again. It’s happened before. In the 1930s, literature departments, following the lead of intellectuals at the *New Republic*, *Partisan Review*, and elsewhere who were looking for total solutions to massive political and economic problems, went all-in for Marxism. It took the cogent counter-revolutionary exertions of those aforementioned close readers, joined by the moral-imagination luminaries at Columbia and Cambridge, to restore a measure of sanity—not to say intellectual honesty.

With encouragement from professors like David Mikics, we could see another such purgation-and-restoration. But not any time soon. The tenured radicals of the 1960s and ’70s, and now their own students, are too ensconced in the lecture halls and seminar rooms of our universities. Let English departments become what Harold Bloom, in *The Western Canon* (1994), predicted they would: ever-smaller cadres expressing, ever-more opaquely, resentment against things as they

were and are. Let literature repair to the garret and, with the Freedom app locked on, to the coffeehouse.

Thomas L. Jeffers is the author, most recently, of Norman Podhoretz: A Biography.