

Literary Values

Editor's Note

"Literary reading is a popular but declining leisure activity, reaching about one-half of the adult population."

— National Endowment for the Arts survey
"Reading at Risk"

I am not discouraged. Before the release of the 2004 National Endowment for the Arts report "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America," if you would have asked me how many adults in the United States read poetry as a leisure activity, I would not have guessed 25 million.

To me, that's a lot, but the figure must be read in its most generous terms, to include people drawn by a *New Yorker* cartoon to the same page as a Jack Gilbert poem. Lucky them. They might have read just that one poem all year. That's enough. The N.E.A. survey nevertheless shows a decline in the percentage of the U.S. adult population that reads literature—from 56.9 percent in 1982, to 54.0 in 1992, to 46.7 in 2002—where *literature* and *reading* are defined as any single poem, play, or work of fiction, without regard to genre or quality, as long as the reading was done as an option and not a school or job requirement.

Strangely, in each of the past five years, this magazine, *New Letters*, now celebrating its 70th year, has consistently increased its readership. The way our audience has grown at *New Letters* tells us something about readers in this country, in a way that circumvents survey numbers. There is real hunger among people for the values of the literary experience, for the life of

reading, for its slower pace. Our job at the magazine has been to offer that experience to as many people as we can, to say, "It is still acceptable, still valuable."

The trouble is that the world-wide information culture has turned against the reading culture.

Not long ago, public transportation, for example, was habitat for readers. On a train, bus, airplane, the door would close and one could see books and magazines, opening like petals of flowers in people's palms, up and down the aisle—a kind of imposed time out from our hurried, pragmatic lives. All gone. Now, those same people check e-mail, call the office, make deals. On airplanes, our noses are one foot from a video screen built into the back of the seat ahead. In airport lobbies, any wish to read is squashed by video monitors in every corner, with MSNBC or CNN announcing the day's problems that make us run a little faster, work a little harder.

Literature requires us to slow down, be quiet, contemplate relationships. Milan Kundera has written in his novel *Slowness*, "There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting." People want that slowness, that contemplatory experience in their lives; but more and more they are made to feel as if it is unnatural to step outside of the mainstream of the accelerated culture.

The questions have come up, however: What difference does it make? So what if people don't read great writers such as Mary Gordon, Hilary Masters, Robert Day, Gladys Swan?

Psychologist James Hillman, citing Confucius, has written that the rectification of society starts with the rectification of its language. Laws and programs begin in words, and if the words of our leaders, Hillman says, are entangled in garbled speech, intoned in nasal whining, bereft of inspiration and wit, and flatter than the commercials that surround them, then we can't expect society to advance.

I rest my case.

Actually, I don't, because Hillman's comments suggest that

literature is important because it is useful to good legislation and social programs. It is not. If that were the case, we could throw away a few things, such as “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” We even could throw away the blackbird. Literature exists as a seedbed for individual thinking, for its own sake. Literature is not a defense of freedom or a means of achieving freedom. A work of literature is the freedom.

People often try to justify literature by giving it some practical use—one way is the habit of searching for themes in literary writing, as if a story were simply a key to answering some of life’s vexing problems. Literature might do that, but so might the newest diet book or political memoir. Literary writing, in fact, resists purposefulness as a tangible goal; it cannot be confused with a recent book called *Shakespeare in Charge: The Bard’s Guide to Leading and Succeeding in Business*, with cover blurbs that praise Shakespeare’s practical advice, by Colin Powell and Warren Buffett.

Literary writing often doesn’t get us anywhere at all, except perhaps deeper into our selves, more in touch with beauty, empathy, and amazement, those intangible qualities that run against the grain of contemporary America. In the November 2004 issue of *Harper’s*, Mark Slouka’s article “on the virtues of idleness” points out this very dilemma: “What we are leaving behind today, at record pace,” he writes, “is whatever belief we might once have had in the value of unstructured time: in the importance of uninterrupted conversation, in the beauty of play. In the thing in itself—unmediated, leading nowhere.”

This is the moral force of literary art, that it is outside of the systems designed to get us advantage over co-workers, get us a client, a stock tip, leverage. Literature does the opposite of those things. At its best and highest, literature creates, instead, a kind of solidarity with the human race. As novelist John Gardner has pointed out, “The writer must be not only capable of understanding people different from himself but fascinated by such people.”

I recently mentioned this N.E.A. survey to several writers who contribute to *New Letters*. It was not news to them, and they shook it off as they always had done. Writers must believe in the value of their work, or they could not continue. It takes an enormous act of faith. In many cases, writers tell me they have been sustained by a little secret they carry regarding the audience they write for. It is this: A work of literature exists in a continuum that transcends its present time. It transcends 2005, even this decade. Literature is greater than the hot book of the week, despite tax laws that force publishers to remainder much of their inventory. Writers often see themselves in the line of Basho and Emily Dickinson, Daniel DeFoe and Martha Gellhorn, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stephen Crane—the long tradition, where readership accumulates across time, long after the author may cease to be, as this morning I returned to a poem by the 19th-century's John Keats.

At my desk at *New Letters*, I say no to dozens of writers each week, some quickly, some after agonizing deliberation. I don't pander to them or condescend to them. Writers always have known that by sitting alone, composing, dreaming, weaving tales, they risk everything. Hours, years, a lifetime of work could be consigned to oblivion for many reasons, beyond the size of the potential audience; yet some of us imagine success. Some of us continue, as John Gardner has said, "the foolish pastime, the making of real art."

– Robert Stewart, editor