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A literary education

by *Joseph Epstein*

On being well-versed in literature.

Sydney Smith, the early-nineteenth-century clergyman, wit, and one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review*, once remarked that, if the same progress as had been made in education were made in the culinary arts, we should today still be eating soup with our hands. Quite so. Sydney Smith's simile holds up all too well in our time. New ideas and reforms continue to crop up in education—from the installation of the elective system more than a century ago at Harvard to the advent of digital technology throughout the educational system in recent years—each, in its turn and time, heralding fresh new revolutions in learning. One after another, these revolutions fizzle, then go down in flames, leaving their heralds all looking like some variation of what Wallace Stevens called “lunatics of one idea.”

Meanwhile, things continue to slide: standards slip, curricula are politicized and watered down, and, despite all the emphasis on schooling at every level of society, the dance of education remains locked into the dreary choreography of one step forward, two steps back. Education remains education, which is to say a fairly private affair. No matter how much more

widespread so-called higher education has become, only a small—one is inclined to say an infinitesimal—minority seems capable of taking serious advantage of it, at any rate during the standard years of schooling.

Let me quickly insert that, when young, I was not myself among this minority. As a student in the middle 1950s, I attended the University of Chicago. No teacher in whose class I sat has ever remembered me upon meeting in later years, and this for good reason: My plan during my student days was to remain as inconspicuous as possible; I was sedulous only in the attempt to hide my ignorance, which was genuine and substantial. But more than mere ignorance was entailed. I somehow could not bring my mind to concentrate—to “focus,” as we say today—for long on many of the matters at hand.

A teacher in command of all the standard academic locutions—those “if you wills” and “as it weres,” with a *mirabile dictu* and other Latin tags thrown in from time to time at no extra charge—might stand authoritatively at his lectern setting out eight reasons for the emergence of the Renaissance. As he did so, all I could think was what induced him to buy that hopeless necktie he was wearing, and might that be a soup stain prominently in the middle of it, and, if so, made by chicken noodle or minestrone? At examination time, I recalled only five of the eight reasons for the Renaissance, and wound up with a C, which did not stand for charming.

Classrooms can, of course, sometimes kill great subjects, and also splendid books. Recognizing this, Willa Cather insisted that her own books not be made available in school editions, for she feared that students, reading them too early and under the duress of formal education, would never return to

them in later life when they were more likely to be truly ready for them. As delivered in conventional classrooms and lecture halls, education is not available to everyone, including sometimes quite bright, even dazzlingly brilliant, people. Henry James was never very good at school, and neither was Paul Valéry; Marcel Proust performed mediocly at the Lycée Condorcet. W. H. Auden failed to come away with a First at Oxford. Sainte-Beuve said of Pascal, who was an authentic genius, that “it was easier for him to make discoveries for himself than to study after the way of others.” Was there something wrong with these men, powerful artists and philosophers all, or something wrong with education, as it is usually construed and practiced?

I had a cousin named Sherwin Rosen, who, before his death at the age of sixty-three, was the chairman of the Economics Department at the University of Chicago, a department that for at least thirty years now has been dominant in its discipline. At his memorial, one of my cousin’s older colleagues, Gary Becker, a Nobel prizewinner, remarked that Sherwin came close to being washed out of the Ph. D. program in economics at the University of Chicago. The reason, Gary Becker said, is that my cousin was slow in response to questions in seminar rooms. He didn’t have confident answers at the ready; his replies tended to be halting, faltering. But then a day or two, sometimes a week, later, Sherwin would return to the professor who had asked him the question and quietly reveal the defect in its formulation. “What this taught me,” Professor Becker said, “is that too much in formal education has to do with quick response, with coughing up information quickly, and not enough leeway is allowed for reflection and brooding in the thoughtful way that serious subjects require.”

I like this anecdote because it subverts normal notions of how education should work. After thirty years teaching in a university, I came to have a certain measured suspicion, sometimes edging onto contempt, for what I called (only to myself) “the good student.” This good student always got the highest grades, because he approached all his classes with a single question in mind: “What does this teacher want?” And once the good student decides, he gives it to him—he delivers the goods. The good student is thus able to deliver very different goods to the feminist teacher at 9:00 am, to the Marxist teacher at 10:00 am, to the conservative teacher at 11:00 am, and just after lunch to the teacher who prides himself on being without any ideology or political tendency whatsoever.

At the University of Chicago, I was obviously neither a “good student,” in the nugatory sense I have just described, nor a seriously passionate one of the kind I most valued as a teacher. Without any gift for pure science or foreign languages or appetite for the often arid abstractions and embarrassingly modest conclusions of social science, when the time came to choose a field of concentration, I felt I had nowhere to go but to become an English major. (When a student in the Lionel Trilling story “Of This Time, Of That Place” tells the professor who is the story’s protagonist that he used to be an English major, the professor, in the only humorous remark I have discovered in all of Trilling’s writing, replies: “Indeed? What regiment?”)

Almost everyone of any imagination wishes he could do a second draft on his education. The reason for this, I suppose, is that we are put through our education well before we can have any grasp on what education is really about. The Duc de Saint-Simon, the greatest writer of memoirs the world has known, noted, with chagrin, that “I had a natural love for reading

and history... . I have often thought that, had they encouraged me to make it my serious study, I might indeed have made something of myself.” In his autobiography *Old Men Forget*, Duff Cooper, the English diplomat, remarks,

Had I devoted as much time to my school work as I did to promiscuous reading I might have obtained some scholastic distinction. But I had a stupid idea that hard work at given tasks was degrading. Brilliant success without undue application and, if possible, combined with dissipation was what I admired.

As for me, had I to do it over again, I should have studied classics, learned Greek and Latin, to be able to read Herodotus and Thucydides, Tacitus and Horace, in the languages in which they wrote; then, too, I shouldn't mind ending my days, like the Victorian gentlemen in the Max Beerbohm drawing, translating Virgil's *Georgics* into perfect English hexameters.

At the University of Chicago in the days I was a student there, English studies had shed their philological center. A student had to study Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Old French, and linguistics, on the notion that these subjects served as a kind of hard-core scientific basis for literary study, but no more. Still, the underlying, the reigning, assumption behind most undergraduate courses was that one would go on to graduate school and a career as a university teacher of English.

English at Chicago in my day was dominated by a school of critics known as Aristotelians. This meant that many works read under their supervision tended to be twisted through the wringer—perhaps mangler is the better word here—of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The results were not often enlightening, and never exciting. The physicist Wolfgang Pauli used to respond to the inadequate answers of his less than brilliant students, “That isn't even

wrong!” I suspect that, had Pauli popped into one of these English Department classes at the University of Chicago during my day there, he would have exclaimed, “That isn’t even dull!”

The one grueling standard the English Department set its students was two lengthy reading lists, to be read outside of regular course work, that an undergraduate English major was tested on at the end of his or her junior and senior years. These lists included all those books that, given any choice, a student would be pleased to elude: Milton’s *Paradise Regained*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*, Locke’s *Second Treatise on Civil Government* are some of the items on these lists that, with a slight shudder, I can still recall. There were ninety or more books on the two lists combined. The assumption behind these reading lists must have been, you call yourself an English major (of no known regiment), you ought to have read the books required by such a pretension. I rather doubt that today any school could get away with asking so much extra work of its students. But then the difference between Harvard and the University of Chicago, it has been said, was that of the two schools Harvard was more difficult to get into, the University of Chicago much more difficult to get out of.

To give some notion of the randomness, the almost accidental, nature of education, which has always impressed me, I would say that the most significant course I took at the University of Chicago was a badly conceived one that was, in effect, a history of the development of the novel. This course was ill-taught by an under-confident instructor not yet thirty. The reading equivalent of a dance marathon, in ten weeks the course went—at the rate of a novel per week—from *The Princess of Cleves* through *Ulysses*, with stops along the way for Jane Austen, Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Mann, and

Proust. What do you suppose a boy of twenty gets out of reading *Swann's Way*? My best guess is somewhere between 15 to 20 percent of what Proust put into it.

Yet still but nonetheless and however, something about this course lit my fire. From it I sensed that, if any inkling about the way the world works and the manner in which human nature is constituted were to be remotely available to me during my stay on the planet, I should have the best chance of discovering it through literature, and perhaps chiefly through the novel. The endless details set out in novels, the thoughts of imaginary characters, the dramatization of large themes through carefully constructed plots, the portrayals of how the world works, really works—these were among the things that literature, carefully attended to, might one day help me to learn.

At nineteen, I read with genuinely heated excitement Max Weber's great essay "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," quite blown away by the astonishing intellectual connections made by its author. I felt my spirit scorched reading Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Weber's and Freud's are ideas to the highest power, yet they were—and here I hope I do not sound condescending—ideas merely. They were ideas used in the sense that T. S. Eliot used the word when he said of Henry James that he "had a mind so fine no idea could violate it."

What I believe Eliot meant by the lilting phrase "a mind so fine no idea could violate it" is not that Henry James was uninterested in ideas, or was incapable of mastering them, but that he, James, felt that there were truths above the

level of ideas, truths of the instincts, of the heart, of the soul, and these were the truths that James, once he had attained to his literary mastery, attempted to plumb in his novels and stories.

Ideas, however resplendent and grand they may be, are, as we know, endlessly subject to revision, if not to utter destruction. Two of the grand idea systems of the past century and a half—that of Marxism and that of Freudianism—have by now gone by the boards; and the third, Darwinism, is currently under heavy fire. Come to think of it, there were probably not eight but eight hundred reasons for the Renaissance, and 678 of these have by now doubtless been shown no longer to hold up.

Not that the literary and the ideational need be mutually exclusive in anyone's education. Combined in the mind of some thinkers the result can be most impressive. John Maynard Keynes was a regular reader of novels and poetry. So was Justice Holmes. Clifford Geertz, the leading anthropologist of his generation, made it his business to keep up with contemporary fiction, some of it fairly ghastly. Sigmund Freud claimed that much of what he knew he learned from the poets, though the world, in my view, would have been much better off had he taken a pass on Sophocles.

My friend Edward Shils, one of the great sociologists of the past half century, read Dickens, Balzac, Conrad, and Cather over and over; and there can little doubt that his having done so made him a better social scientist. I shall never forget Edward telling me one evening how much he admired Milton Friedman, George Stigler, and other of the free-market economists who were his colleagues at the University of Chicago. "They are highly intelligent," he

said, “and subtle and penetrating and have intellectual courage. Yet with all that, Joseph, I fear that they are insufficiently impressed with the mysteries of life.”

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If I think of my own education as chiefly a literary one, it is not in the conventional sense that a literary education might have been construed a century or so ago. The beneficiary of such an education at that time would have been expected to know thoroughly the literary history of his own and at least another nation; he would be in possession of two or three if not all the Romance languages and the two main ancient ones; he would have a mastery of the rules if not the practice of prosody, and carry in his head yards and yards of poetry and long tracts of Shakespeare.

My own literary education bears no resemblance to this. Describing it quickly, I should call it slapdash, wildly uneven, and chiefly autodidactical. But, then, apart from those people trained as professional scholars or scientists, we are all finally autodidacts, making our way on our own as best we can, with our real teachers being the books we happen to read. Because of this, the best that any university can do is point its students in the right

direction: let them know what the intellectual possibilities are and give them a taste of the best that has been thought and written in the past. In this regard, the University of Chicago of my student days may be said to have done its job.

But the reason I call my own education literary is that it is anchored in the belief that literature, largely though not exclusively imaginative literature, provides the best education for a man or woman in a free society. “It is the business of literature,” wrote Desmond MacCarthy, “to turn facts into ideas.” The method of literature, MacCarthy means, is induction: facts first, ideas afterwards. Scientists and social scientists claim to be operating by induction, but there are grounds for thinking that they do not, not really; that instead they are testing, hopefully, hunches, which they call hypotheses. But novelists and poets, if they are true to their craft, are not out to prove anything. If they tell their stories honestly and persuasively, straight and true, somehow all those little frogs of fact might just turn into a handsome prince of a beautiful idea.

Still, ideas are not really what literature is chiefly about. When you have identified and extracted the ideas from novels and poems, I’m not sure that you have a lot to show. In his *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust, scholars have revealed, was working under Bergsonian conceptions of time; Thomas Mann, in *The Magic Mountain*, was limning the flood of political ideas in the time of the rise of European Fascism. But when you have said these things, when you have extruded the ideas from these writers, what, really, do you have? Perhaps you would have done better to have read Henri Bergson directly, or an intellectual history of Europe between the wars, than either

Proust or Mann. While novelists may have a plentitude of ideas, or deal with complex ideas in their work, it is rarely their ideas that are the most compelling things about these works.

Or consider Theodore Dreiser, a glutton for ideas, almost all of them bad. Dreiser was a man who fell for Stalin and Hilter both, who coarsened the already crude Social Darwinism of his day, who believed in the heavy role of something called “chemisms” in determining human fate. This same Dreiser, born homely and poor, raised in a household dominated by religious superstition, was probably America’s greatest novelist of the past century. This, I would say, was because he felt more deeply than anyone else what it was like to be an outsider and knew more about the heat of desire, of sheer human wanting—think of *Sister Carrie*, or think, even more, of *An American Tragedy*—than any man who ever wrote. If Dreiser’s work had to live on its ideas, it would today be justifiably dead.

So it was not the search for ideas that was at the center of my literary education. The great vast majority of ideas, after all, are endlessly, infinitely mutable, subject to revision and rejection, not to speak of obliteration and eradication. And it is a good thing that many ideas have a relatively short shelf-life. Some because they are bad, even pernicious ideas: the Master Race, the class struggle, the Oedipus complex, and Socialism are four bad ideas with wretched consequences that come immediately to mind.

“To create a concept,” wrote Ortega y Gasset, “is to leave reality behind.” Ortega is saying that no concept, no mere idea, is sufficiently comprehensible to capture the reality of the phenomena it seeks to describe. Concepts do, true enough, serve the function of distracting our minds from the richness of

the reality that generally manages to evade us. Give something a concept label — ah, attention deficit disorder, ah, mid-life crisis, ah, soccer moms, ah, the Invisible Hand of the Marketplace — ah, how soothing it all is! But it oughtn't to be. Invoke those concepts — and many others — and, *poof!*, reality leaves the room.

One of the inadequately recognized functions of literature is to show how reality always eludes too firmly drawn ideas. Owing to the spread of so-called (always so-called) higher (higher than what, one wants increasingly to ask) education and the pervasiveness of the mass- and online media, the world today is perhaps more concept- and idea-ridden today than at any other time in history. One of the reasons for anger at the theory-ridden English departments of our day is that they sold out the richness of literature for a small number of crude ideas — gender, race, class, and the rest of the detritus — and hence gave up their cultural birthright for a pot of message.

One of the most important functions of literature in the current day is to cultivate a healthy distrust of the ideas thrown up by journalism and social science. Novels and poems can be the antidote here. “The novel’s spirit is the spirit of complexity,” Milan Kundera writes. “The novelist says to the reader: things are not as simple as you think.” When he is working well, the good novelist persuasively establishes that life is more surprising, bizarre, fascinating, complex, and rich than any shibboleth, concept, or theory used to explain it. A literary education establishes a strong taste for the endless variousness of life; it teaches how astonishing reality is — and how obdurate to even the most ingenious attempts to grasp its mechanics or explain any serious portion of it! “A man is more complicated than his thoughts,” wrote Valéry, which, if you think about it, is happily so.

For the thirty years that I taught literature courses at Northwestern University, I preferred to think that I was a better teacher than I was a student. (I also came to believe that a better education is to be had through teaching than through listening to teachers—and if that ain't the sound of one hand clapping, then I don't know what is.) In this teaching, I made no attempt to turn my undergraduate students into imitation or apprentice scholars, but instead I wanted them to acquire, as best they were able, what a small number of great writers thought was useful knowledge in this mystery-laden life.

I wanted my students to come away from their reading learning, for example, from Charles Dickens the importance of friendship, loyalty, and kindness in a hard world; from Joseph Conrad the central place of fulfilling one's duty in a life dominated by spiritual solitude; from Willa Cather, the dignity that patient suffering and resignation can bring; from Tolstoy, the divinity that the most ordinary moments can provide—kissing a child in her bed goodnight, working in a field, greeting a son returned home from war; and from Henry James, I wanted them to learn that it is the obligation of every sentient human being to stay perpetually on the *qui vive* and become a man or woman on whom nothing is lost, and never to forget, as James puts in his novel *The Princess Casamassima*, that “the figures on the chessboard [are] still the passions and the jealousies and superstitions of man.”

Literature operates neither by telescope nor microscope. “Impression is for the writer,” noted Proust, “what experimentation is for the scientist.”

Impression is by its nature inexact, but it does in time give a point of view, a many-angled point of view. One of the lessons Proust's great novel teaches is how different a character, a situation, an event seems from different angles

and perspectives, and even then how inexact our knowledge remains. The British historian Lewis Namier remarked that we study history so that we can learn how things didn't happen. That may seem a small profit, but it isn't, since so many people are regularly attempting to foist on us their own false version of how things did or do happen.

So from the study of literature we learn that life is sad, comic, heroic, vicious, dignified, ridiculous, and endlessly amusing —sometimes by turns, sometimes all at once—but never more grotesquely amusing than when a supposedly great thinker comes along to insist that he has discovered and natively formulated the single key to its understanding. One of the reasons that most literary artists are contemptuous of Sigmund Freud—whose thought Vladimir Nabokov once characterized as no more than private parts covered up by Greek myths—is that his extreme determinism is felt to be immensely untrue to the rich complexity of life, with its twists and turns and manifold surprises.

In 1887 Matthew Arnold wrote a review of a French translation of *Anna Karenina*. In this review, Arnold finds Tolstoy's novel, as we still do today, filled with “great sensitiveness, subtlety, and finesse, addressing itself with entire disinterestedness and simplicity to the representation of human life. The Russian novelist is thus master of a spell to which the secrets of human nature—both what is external and what is internal, gesture and manner no less than thought and feeling—willingly make themselves known.”

Later in his review, Arnold, inevitably, compares Tolstoy's novel to *Madame Bovary*, another novel on the same subject and theme. *Madame Bovary*, Arnold writes, “is a work of *petrified feeling*; over it hangs an atmosphere of

bitterness, irony, impotence; not a personage in the book to rejoice or console us; the springs of freshness and feeling are not there to create such personages.” Flaubert, Arnold concludes, “pursues her [Emma Bovary] without pity or pause, as with malignity; he is harder upon her himself than any reader ever, I think, will be inclined to be.”

Tolstoy, we now know, originally set out to crush Anna Karenina quite as thoroughly as Flaubert did Emma Bovary. But in mid-composition, discovering the richness of the character he created, he fell in love with her. This caused him radically to rework his novel, to soften Anna, to harden Alexi Alexandrovich Karenin, to make Count Vronsky more foolish than he originally intended. The major difference between Tolstoy and Flaubert is that Tolstoy worked from life, Flaubert from ideas—and in this instance, from a very poor idea, which was hatred of the bourgeoisie and of provincial life. Of the two men, Tolstoy had the larger heart, which gave him the greater appreciation of the complexity of human existence and stronger skepticism about the ability of coarse and blatant ideas to encompass it, including those of the Russian novelist who began this work.

I hope that I am not taken for the enemy of ideas generally. I am not. The separation of Church and State (with the details to be negotiated), the ends-and-means argument, the scientific method, $E=mc^2$, all of them are excellent, irreplaceable ideas. Plato's cave is a wonderfully provocative idea. Yet, for the person of literary education, all ideas, as Orwell felt ought to be the case with all saints, are guilty until proven innocent.

The effect of a literary education is not to gainsay the usefulness of many ideas, but to understand their limitation. In the end, a literary education teaches the limitation of the intellect itself, at least when applied to the great questions, problems, issues, and mysteries of life. On this point, Marcel Proust wrote:

Our intellect is not the most subtle, the most powerful, the most appropriate instrument for revealing the truth. It is life that, little by little, example by example, permits us to see that what is most important to our heart, or to our mind, is learned not by reasoning, but through other agencies. Then it is that the intellect, observing their superiority, abdicates its control to them upon reasoned grounds and agrees to become their collaborator and lackey.

A literary education teaches that human nature is best, if always incompletely, understood through the examination of individual cases, with nothing more stimulating than those cases that provide exceptions that prove no rule—the unique human personality, in other words. A literary education with its built-in skepticism about flimsy ideas and especially about large idea systems, is naturally against fanaticism. It provides an enhanced appreciation of the mysteries and complexities of life that reinforces the inestimable value of human liberty—liberty especially of the kind that leaves us free to pursue that reality from which we all live at a great distance and run the risk of dying without having known.

“First grub,” said Bertolt Brecht, “then ethics.” A bad idea, I would say. A better idea is, “First reality, then ideas.” This in any case is what my own literary education has taught me.¹

1. This essay is adapted from a talk given at the Third Annual Western Civilization Dinner of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

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The stresses under which democratic ideals currently find themselves further challenge those who would advocate for the teaching of literature as part of higher education to identify a more expanded range of capacities that literary education can support than was the case up until the end of the 20th century. Contentious debates over the benefits-or drawbacks-of a liberal education are as old as America itself. Literary education is essential for the youth to widen their outlook, enlarge their mind, sharpen their intellect, increase knowledge and give food to their thought. It develops in each one of us the power of self-expression and self-culture. The true aim of education is to give us intellectual enlightenment to make us better men- morally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually. It is the training of the human spirit.