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Chapter 7

READING AND THINKING CRITICALLY IN THE AGE OF DISPUTATION

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Dedicated to Max Weismann, Chairman of the Great Books Academy and Will Fitzhugh, Editor and Publisher of *The Concord Review*.

ABSTRACT

This essay will examine the methodology that lies at the heart of critical thinking, its strengths and its weaknesses. It will consider the history of the book and its corollary, the "enlightened reader", while assessing the decline of readerly excellence and the social consequences that gave rise to disputatious thinking. The argument will be that the loss of sustaining values brought about by countercultural influences ensured the triumph of narcissism and the emergence of a reinvented orality founded on modern media, especially the Internet, which celebrates emotional groupthink at the expense of the "enlightened self". The result is the diminution of reason that all but precludes the possibility of critical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

By all accounts America is a nation at war with herself. Listen to Talk Radio and NPR, watch Fox News and MSNBC News, read the *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* and the clash between "progressives" and conservatives becomes apparent: Our differing perspectives on spending, military intervention, and social welfare policies, as well as environmental, medical, and educational legislation suggest a myriad of issues that divide us. But the rift is deeper than that. Beneath the chasm of ideological and party preferences are fundamental disagreements in our worldviews. These conflicts are rooted in how we were raised and inform the emotional basis for our intellectual arguments. These foundational

perspectives provide the starting point for the values that shape our vision of what society should be and, indeed, inform our dreams and hopes as Americans.

How do we navigate our conceptual divide? We must be “strong readers”. We must immerse ourselves in the books and ideas expressed by some of the greatest scholars of all time, men and women who have provided us with profound insights into the human condition. We must employ critical thinking to expose the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. Our analytical intelligence must prevail over our emotional responses. We must possess a disciplinary expertise whether that be history or literature or science or philosophy or music or art that supplies the knowledge and perspective with which to engage in critical thinking.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING AND HOW IS IT ACHIEVED?

While there are many definitions for critical thinking, the one provided by Your Dictionary.com will suffice: “The term critical thinking refers to the thought processes used to evaluate information and the practice of using such conclusions to guide behavior. The process of critical thinking is associated with accuracy, logic, depth, fairness, credibility, and intellectual clarity” (as cited in “Define Critical Thinking”, n.d.). Thus, critical thinking is an intensive analysis of the basis of an argument by means of objective criteria. As Anthony Weston notes in *A Rulebook for Arguments*, critical thinking is argument, rather than disputation. Critical thinking, he suggests, is not “a verbal fistfight”. It is about offering “a set of reasons or evidence in support of a conclusion” (Weston, 1986/1992, p. x).

What is the methodological basis for critical thinking? It begins with the hypothesis that we are attempting to prove. Thus, the conclusion becomes the driving engine for our hypothesis since all arguments must be validated by the conclusion. A critical thinker needs to distinguish between the premises that form the foundation for the hypothesis and the conclusion. The argument should begin with reliable premises and it should proceed in logical sequence. Examples should be representative of the issues at hand. The critical thinker should consider counter examples and demonstrable evidence that negates them. Argument by analogy may be helpful. Sources should be informative and unbiased. Their claims must be validated. If impartiality is suspect, verify independently the claims made. Ad hominem arguments are not necessarily cause for dismissal of evidence. The terms and language used must have clarity and reflect the discipline and methodology employed. Correlated events must be proven to bear upon the findings. The argument must demonstrate the causal factors that inexorably lead to the conclusion. The conclusion must be the best, most likely consequence (Weston, 1986/1992).

Critical thinking, however, is more than a rulebook for presenting a good argument. Values, skills, and attitudes influence our “systematic evaluation” that forms the basis for our critical thinking. As M. Neil Browne suggests in *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, how we pose the issues framing our argument is essential to the success of our endeavor. Through this means we uncover the weakness of an argument. We discern the value-laden terms, as well as any factual bias and reductionism that could lead to “the myth of the ‘right answer’”. We learn to distinguish between thinking and feeling by positioning ourselves outside the body of the argument to pose the question “Who Cares?” in order to be

reminded of the importance of assessing the relevancy of issues pertaining to our subject. Most of all, we are able to distinguish between "weak-sense critical thinking" that affirms ascendant beliefs and "strong-sense critical thinking" that challenges the basis for even the most sacrosanct causes (Browne, 1994/2007, pp. 2, 7, 9, 10). To accomplish this means ascertaining the hidden motives, the emotions and belief systems driving our argument, those values that form the foundation for our worldview.

For Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren critical thinkers are "active readers" who have the ability to engage in a sophisticated and knowledgeable cultural analysis about a broad range of subjects. However, to accomplish this "active readers" must be able to follow an argument in all its complexity in order to assess its relative strengths and weaknesses. In 1972 Adler and Van Doren published *How to Read a Book,* a revision of an earlier edition written by Adler that was first published in 1940. *How to Read a Book* provides readers with a detailed analysis on how to develop their skills as "active readers". Many of its techniques are used by the critical thinking community today. So what is its methodology? Adler and Van Doren make a distinction between being "informed" and "enlightened". In terms of reading a book and understanding its arguments, the authors suggest "to be informed is to know simply that something is the case". Whereas to be "enlightened", they assert, occurs "when, in addition to knowing what an author says, you know what he means and why he says it" (Adler & Van Doren, 1972, p. 11).

To succeed in this endeavor, the "enlightened reader" must be engaged in critical thinking. He or she must understand the entire story and its larger relevance, which necessitates a broad-based cultural understanding in order to ascertain the book's merits. For the "active reader" must be capable of evaluating the narrative through an assessment of the potential strengths and weakness of the argument. He or she must possess the ability to make inferences, draw connections, and reach conclusions that extend well beyond the book under discussion. The "active reader" has the capacity for original thought. His or her analytic perspective presupposes that truth, rather than belief, governs his or her analysis. This intellectual journey—often arduous and fraught with challenges—is the pathway to enlightenment (Adler & Van Doren, 1972).

Critical thinking defines the "enlightened reader". Note, for example, the similarity between Adler and Van Doren's expression "active reading" and Browne and Keeley's term "strong-sense critical thinking". Adler and Van Doren suggest there are four stages of "active reading".

First, is "Elementary Reading" in which the basic meaning of the book is ascertained. Second, is "Inspectional Reading" where a reader learns how to skim or pre-read a book to ascertain its intention, structure, and classification—history, science, fiction, and other designations.

Third, is "Analytical Reading", which places demands upon the reader. To be an "active reader"—which one must be to be engaged in "Analytical Reading"—necessitates addressing four essential questions. What is the narrative? What are the detailed arguments and how are these presented? Is the book entirely truthful or just in places? Finally, what is its significance? Analytical reading necessitates a deep understanding of the scope of a work. At the apex of the "active reading" pyramid is "Syntopical Reading". Here the reader makes substantive comparisons between books based on their subject matter. "Syntopical Reading" is more than the sum of its parts. A "Syntopical Reader" has read broadly across subjects and disciplines, thereby achieving a cross fertilization of ideas enabling him or her to draw

inferences and conclusions that transcend the content of any given work or works (Adler & Van Doren, 1972).

All "Analytic Readers" are engaged in critical thinking. They are determining the author's intent, his or her terminology, as well as the premises and conclusions posed by the author that form the basis of opinion or argument. An "Analytic Reader" understands that "reading a book is a kind of conversation" (Adler & Van Doren, 1972, p. 137), one that employs fair-minded approaches to criticism. But for Adler and Van Doren, it is the "Syntopical Reader"—one who is a comparative reader engaged in a broad-based spectrum of analysis capable of drawing inferences and conclusions larger than the sum of any one book or collections of works—who is the critical thinker par excellence (Adler & Van Doren, 1972). Thus, we realize that *How to Read a Book* forms the basis for what we today refer to as critical thinking.

History of the Book, the "Enlightened Reader", and the "Information Landscape"

To understand what is at stake in the development and nurturance of the "enlightened reader"—one who is a "Syntopical Reader" fully engaged in critical thinking—it is helpful to place reading and thinking within a historical context. To accomplish this, we must familiarize ourselves with the history of books and their relationship to and their impact upon readers. We must ask ourselves the following: How did the development of books change the way humans thought, behaved, and interacted with their world?

Our "information landscape" commenced, according to Robert Darnton, when humans first began writing around 4000 BC. Egyptian hieroglyphs date back to 3200 BC. Alphabetical characters were introduced around 1000 BC. Jack Goody has suggested that writing was the single most important innovation in human history, a development that paved the way for the emergence of the book and its decisive role in history (Darnton, 2009).

During the late 5th century BC, the book, as we now understand it, emerged. It was during this period that images on Attic vases transition from depictions of books as devices to preserve critical information for educational and other purposes to scenes of readers actively reading books while engaging in conversations or attending social gatherings. By then books began to assume their function to instruct and delight. Books were read aloud before groups of people since oratory was the prevalent form of communication. Oratory was necessary because the written words ran together making it almost impossible to distinguish intention and meaning until vocalized, but also because manuscripts were scarce and readers relatively few compared with those hungering to understand their meaning and relevance. During the Hellenic age oral reading became prevalent and private collectors began acquiring libraries, typically for professional purposes. However even then there were readers for whom knowledge extended beyond the bounds of disciplinary rigor. Thus when Socrates queried Euthydemus on the reason he possessed so many books, "perhaps a rhapsodist, then?", the response by Euthydemus suggested a passion for reading that extended well beyond the bounds of professional dictates (as cited in Cavallo & Chartier, 1995/1999, p. 8).

Julian Jaynes has argued that the modern origin of human consciousness, what we commonly refer to as self-consciousness, occurred around 1200 BC when the bicameral mind

broke down and began establishing associative connections that enabled one side of the brain to communicate to the other. This transition, he suggested, was evident in the distinctions between the writing style of *The Iliad*—preconscious, when thoughts were interpreted as the commands of God compelling humans to take action—and *The Odyssey*—conscious, a realization that these voices were actually the individual's own thoughts and feelings (Jaynes, 1976).

By the second century AD, during Roman Empire, books were transitioning from scrolls—papyrus—to codex—typically, parchment (Cavallo & Chartier, 1995/1999). The codex contained sheets that were folded, stitched, and bound. This format resembled the shape and look of books we read today. This revolution in book production ushered in the second transformative change in our "information landscape" (Darnton, 2009). More books were produced and they were increasingly featured in private and public libraries where citizens might gather to hear them read. By the third century the codex was becoming an essential means for the dissemination of Christianity, aided by the facility of turning pages and leafing through books (Cavallo & Chartier, 1995/1999; Darnton, 2009).

The Middle Ages shifted the domain for reading from outdoor, public spaces to the interior of religious institutions. During this period reading shifted from public oratory to silent or murmured reading (Cavallo & Chartier, 1995/1999), a practice accelerated by the delineation of words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters of a book, as well as tables of contents and indexes (Darnton, 2009). Between the 11th and 14th centuries, cities became ever more vital, encouraging the growth of schools and augmenting the ties between reading, writing, libraries, and education. (Cavallo & Chartier, 1995/1999).

In his work *Secretum meum* (circa 1347-1353), early Renaissance scholar Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) provides us with an illustration of critical thinking. In this book Petrarch envisions himself in a conversation with Saint Augustine (354-430), the great medieval philosopher who reconciled ancient Greek philosophy with Judeo-Christian belief. Their imagined discourse illuminates a new style of reading and thinking in which books are more than just guides to memory. Rather, they become, according to Petrarch, "a sort of artificial memory" (Manguel, 1996/1997, p. 63) that enables the reader to travel through time by means of thoughts and ideas expressed in books. This cognitive journey often necessitates assembling and rearranging ideas from many sources in a library in order to arrive at an inspired analysis and interpretation, a means by which Petrarch seeks to reconcile secular humanism and Christian faith. This, for him, is the path to obtaining "divine truth", represented in *Secretum meum* by the watchful presence of Lady Truth (Manguel, 1996/1997). Thus, Petrarch may be seen as one of the early practitioners of "active" or "strong reading" in his quest for intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Consequently, he is closely associated with the ideas advanced by Adler and Van Doren and advocates of critical thinking today.

In other words, in assessing the truth or falsity of ideas among books, Petrarch became an early advocate for the textual analysis that we today associate with critical thinking. Certainly, Anthony Grafton was correct in pointing out the creative misreading Renaissance scholars gave to classical texts, as almost certainly Petrarch did in reinterpreting and reinventing the ideas expressed in the writings of Saint Augustine (Grafton, 1999). Nevertheless, the shift away from public oratory to individualized and silent readings in the Medieval Age led to innovations by Renaissance scholars who were motivated to seek their own interpretations of the classics (Grafton, 1999, i).

In the 1450s the invention of moveable type for printing was the third great transformation in the information landscape (Darnton, 2009). While the publication of the Gutenberg Bible may not have immediately ushered in a revolution in the reading habits of the West, there can be little question that this technological innovation made it easier and less expensive to produce books. Increasing accessibility of reading material would profoundly alter the communication practices of everyday life. With affordable publishing and changes in worldview came the rise of secular literature and a mass reading public.

A persuasive argument has been made by Jonathan Parry, based on a cross-cultural comparison of India and the West, that modernization was not the inevitable outcome of mass literacy. Rather, literacy was a precondition for "cognitive modernism" that was nurtured by the development of a print culture fostered by the Protestant Reformation. The path to salvation for the Christian believer shifted away from ecclesiastical authority and princely authority toward individual initiative. Thanks to the availability of relatively affordable Bibles, men, women, and even children could now read and interpret for themselves the words of God. Since the printing revolution was under mercantile influences, rather than clerical or aristocratic control, Parry suggests the economic marketplace encouraged a "democratization of society and learning" in Europe (Parry, 1985, p. 219). This gave rise to secular influences that resulted in the Scientific Revolution (1550-1700). The Scientific Revolution, in turn, fostered changes in thought and behavior in the 18th and 19th centuries that led to the development of the Industrial Revolution in the West (Parry, 1985).

Whereas readers in earlier ages were relatively few, their capabilities limited, and their access to printed materials severely restricted, by the second half of the 18th century in Europe increasing numbers of men, women, and children read books whether for information or pleasure (Cavallo & Chartier, 1995/1999). This burgeoning literacy coupled with the growth of urban centers helped to accelerate the shift from agrarian to urban communities as industrialization fundamentally transformed habits of mind. As Rolf Engelsing suggested, "Intensive reading", a practice by which a family might have a bible and one or two other books that were read over the course of a lifetime, gave way to "extensive reading", an inclination by family members to read a variety of publications (cited in Lyons, 2010). Books became cheaper and more readily available and the burgeoning middle class diversified its tastes to include not only religious material but also newspapers, chapbooks, and fiction. With this diversification in reading material came possibilities for reinvention in the scope of readers' lives (Cavallo & Chartier, 1995/1999, ii).

The fourth seismic shift in the information landscape was the Internet, which dates back to 1974. However, the concept of an electronic, Web-based communication network extended back to earlier experiments in computer networking, culminating in the creation in 1969 of ARPANET. By 1991 physicists were communicating on the Web. By the mid-1990s search engines were introduced. Search engine technology enabled users to connect to information content via hypertext links that offered text, audio, and visual content. By 1998 Google was founded (Darnton, 2009). Two years later it became the most utilized search engine on the Web. It remains the global leader today.

How did this technological innovation in the delivery of information content from the printed page to the Internet impact the reader? The plight of newspapers over the course of the 20th century and into our new millennium is one indication of the movement away from text-based material toward visually saturated content (Sheets, 2009; Shaughnessy, 2009; Sheets, "Making Waves", 2009). In 1920 there were over 2,000 newspapers in the United

States. By 1950 there were only 1,772. Newspapers struggled during the Great Depression and after wartime wage and price controls were lifted. The challenges mounted during the 1950s and 1960s as televisions infiltrated American households (Baldasty, 2007). Nevertheless, newspaper circulation grew until 1970. But the downward trend in readership is clear if newspaper circulation in households is used as an indicator. In 1950 newspaper circulation in American households was 123 percent (1.23 per household) as compared with 67 percent in 1990 and 53 percent by 2000. In a survey of weekday readership, the only Americans whose weekday readership increased from 1999 to 2003 were those with postgraduate degrees. Among Latinos, the largest growing demographic group in America, the 4-point drop in readership represented a sharper decline than for either whites or African Americans (*The State of the News Media 2004*).

Nor was this decline in readership among Americans confined to newspapers. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) noted in its 2007 report *To Read or Not to Read* that nearly half of all young adults ages 18-24 in America did not read for pleasure. Indeed, the trend markedly worsened from 1984 to 2004 since the percentage of 17-year-old adults who rarely if ever read for pleasure during that timeframe had doubled (*To Read or Not to Read*, 2007).

Decline of Critical Thinking and "Readerly" Excellence

In order to assess the impact of the Internet on reading practices today, we must analyze this technological shift within the context of our recent cultural and political history. Until the "Culture Wars" (1960s-1990s) succeeded in felling the Western Canon, America was a society motivated to understand its cultural heritage, and for much of the 20th century this meant reading the "Great Books" (Sheets, 2010). But an appreciation of the Canon requires several unspoken assumptions that today are only affirmed by cultural conservatives. These include the following. There are national cultural values to which all Americans should subscribe and these are defined by American Exceptionalism. Our culture is hierarchical, which suggests that some books, music, art, and dance are judged better than others and, therefore, more worthy of our appreciation. Our leaders—academics, critics, and public intellectuals—must shape the standards and values that inform our appreciation of culture. These standards and values are determined by excellence rather than identity politics. Finally, as Americans we are aspirational, desiring to understand the greatest cultural endeavors of Western Civilization upon which we base our cultural heritage. These assumptions guided America's cultural practices and, to a large degree, determined one's social status through the late 1960s. An individual might not have gone to Harvard University or Columbia University or The University of Chicago, but having read the *Great Books of the Western World* meant that he or she could hold his or her own in any conversation with intellectuals, political leaders, and captains of industry. But this achievement was predicated on becoming critical thinkers as Mortimer J. Adler understood when he first published *How to Read a Book* in 1940.

At the heart of this aspirational society was the "middlebrow" reader whose ideas, tastes, and values were inculcated by a middlebrow culture influenced by individuals who were regarded as America's cultural leaders (Rubin, 1992). The middlebrow reader was charged

with a “manly” quest of self improvement, the culmination of which was a mastery of the Western Canon. The middlebrow reader’s purpose was driven by the two operative assumptions. “By reading and understanding the Great Books one obtains a better understanding of some of the greatest contributions to Western Civilization, thereby acquiring the analytic and competitive skills for communicating and interacting successfully in society and the workplace”. Contrast that perspective with today’s feminized groupthink fueled by narcissism and a need for social validation that is motivated by political correctness: “If I celebrate ‘me’ and advocate social justice, my family and friends will acknowledge I am a good person” (iii).

Today even the term middlebrow sends shudders down our spines. Who, indeed, wants or aspires to middle anything? The Baby-Boom Generation felt that rules did not apply to them, that they were special, that the Darwinian struggle of “Who is the Fittest?” need not apply. In the aftermath of the Culture Wars that climaxed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the notion of a hierarchical society dictated by excellence dissolved. Instead of a nation of middlebrow strivers struggling to master the Great Books, there followed successive generations of Americans celebrating a culture predicated on “me” (Sheets, 2010).

Our changing social mores were exemplified by the responses to Robert Pinsky’s “Favorite Poem Project” initiated in 1997. Readers were asked by Pinsky, then the United States Poet Laureate, to supply the title of their favorite poem along with a brief assessment of its “personal meaning”. Over 17,000 replies were received. What the database reveals is that the respondents felt no compunction to refer to the canonical heritage of great poetry. Their selections were overwhelmingly dictated by subjective, personal experience. By way of example, twenty-five people choose “Little Boy Blue”. Of these, seven replied that they were moved by the poem because of the sentiment expressed by the poet Eugene Field, who wrote the poem after his son’s death. All seven individuals mentioned their experience in nursing a very sick child or having lost one (Rubin, 2009).

Of those who participated in the “Favorite Poem Project”, overwhelmingly their responses were dictated by emotional feeling rather than analytic complexity. Thus, one writer commented on the religious spirituality of Whitman while another emphasized the healing powers associated with “self care and self love”. All told, Rubin concluded, “the responses to Pinsky’s query compellingly reveal people remaking texts in light of both their inner emotions and the social relationships and cultural values that have shaped their reading experiences” (Rubin, 2009, p. 426). But over and above the “Favorite Poem Project” was the cultural validation of the subjectivity of the self-anointed critic. When Jeff Bezos introduced the online bookstore Amazon.com in 1994, it was the customer reviews and in-house reviews that drove buyer selection, rather than newspaper, magazine, and journal reviews. One reader suggested, “It was breaking rules. It was about going against the grain. It really wasn’t about selling. Amazon really catered to that by letting people put up reviews of books” (Rubin, 2009, p. 427).

An even more dramatic illustration of the elevation of personal opinion at the expense of “elite” critical assessment was demonstrated with the phenomenal success of “Oprah’s Book Club” on the syndicated television program “The Oprah Winfrey Show”. The book club was introduced in September of 1996 and may conclude when Oprah’s program ends in 2011 after completing its 25th season. But by any measure thus far, it would appear that the monthly book selections were most influential between 1996 and 2002 (Weinman, 2009). Using 1999 as a point of reference, “Oprah’s Book Club” attracted 13 million monthly viewers, almost all

of whom were women. In the weeks preceding or following "Oprah's Book Club", it is estimated that nearly one million readers or buyers read or bought the books discussed on her program (Rubin, 2009). Oprah's "pitch" was designed to elicit the emotional engagement of viewers through the introduction of biographical information about the author appearing on the program or social details about the story. But the motivations influencing sales were fueled by celebrity, virtue politics, and groupthink: "Oprah liked the book; I will too, after all, it's about personal redemption"; "Oprah Winfrey is black; she's a good woman; I am a good woman if I read this book"; and "Oprah and so many other women in her audience loved this book, and so will I".

POLITICS, WORLDVIEW, AND THE DECLINE OF CRITICAL THINKING

At the heart of all "active" or "strong reading" lies critical thinking, the ability to assess dispassionately the strengths or weakness of any book, concept, and idea. But what happens when the worldview shifts such that all authority or authoritative scholarship, formerly known as excellence, is dismissed in favor of championing the underdog, the victimized, the disenfranchised—or those who are perceived as disenfranchised, although they may occupy the seat of power or be celebrated and advanced by those in power—not on the basis of excellence but because we perceive that they have suffered some form of injustice.

Since the late 1980s academe has turned its back on excellence. Scholars, some deceased, others aged, and the rest marginalized have voiced their complaints including Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987); Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (1989/1996); Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990/2008); Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (1990); Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994); and Philip Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority* (2006), to name just a few. What began in English Departments as postmodern literary "Theory" and more prosaically assumed the mantle of identity politics elsewhere in academe now reins supreme (Kernan, 1997; Patai & Corral, 2005).

Not surprisingly in the 2008 revised introduction to *Tenured Radicals*, Kimball quotes Jay Parini, who is representative of the generation of scholars who came to ascendancy in the universities and colleges by the late 1980s and who now dictate our academic standards and values.

> After the Vietnam War, a lot of us didn't just crawl back into our literary cubicles; we stepped into academic positions. With the war over, our visibility was lost, and it seemed for a while—to the unobservant—that we had disappeared. Now we have tenure, and the work of reshaping the universities has begun in earnest.
>
> —Jay Parini, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
> (Kimball, 1990/2008, p. ix)

How has this shift in countercultural values impacted our educational institutions? Mark Bauerlein provides a devastating account of the "knowledge deficits" of today's under-thirty

generation in his study *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* by examining student performance in a range of disciplines including history, civics, math/science/technology, and fine arts. In a 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress history exam administered to seniors in high school, for example, Bauerlein notes that 57 percent tested “below basic”, the lowest category, and only 1 percent were judged “advanced”. Of those taking the exam, a majority, 52 percent, when asked to identify a U.S. ally during World War II selected a member of the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—rather than the Soviet Union (Bauerlein, 2008). Not surprisingly the “dumbing down” of history in the schools has led William H. Fitzhugh, publisher of the quarterly historical journal *The Concord Review*, which publishes the best scholarly papers submitted in English from high school students from around the world, to conclude, “Most kids don’t know how to write, don’t know any history, and that’s a disgrace” (Dillon, 2011, p. 10).

But the “knowledge deficits” among high school students and young adults are more fundamental than a lack of core competency or even the ability to write a good history paper. Simply put, today’s students and young adults are not reading. Thus, Bauerlein demonstrates that during a twenty year period between 1982 and 2002, literary readers incurred a 28 percent rate of decline among 18-24-year-olds. The result was that its members dropped from the second-strongest literary readers in 1982 to the weakest of the six age-cohorts tested between the ages of 18 and 74 in 2002 (Bauerlein, 2008, iv, p. 46).

Perhaps the most damning assessment of the deficits of higher education to date is Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Their study documents the decline in critical thinking by students at four-year colleges and universities in the United States. The analysis, derived from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), is based on an open-ended performance evaluation that examines skills in both performance and analytical writing. The study was based on responses from 2,300 students who took the CLA, which measures “critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and writing” (cited in Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 21). The results were devastating. Forty-five percent of those taking the assessment “did not demonstrate any statistically significant improvement in CLA performance during the first two years of college” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 121). Thirty-six percent showed no gains over the course of four years. Where there was improvement, these gains were modest. On average there was only 0.18 standard deviation during the first two years and 0.47 over the course of four years. Thus a student in the 50th percentile would move into the 68th percentile four years later, but this improvement is, in effect, skewed because it would be measured against entering first year students who, by comparison, would be academically inexperienced and, therefore, would not test as well (Jaschik, 2011).

What accounts for these dismal results? Arum and Roksa suggest that a third of all students in a given semester did not take courses requiring more than 40 pages of reading weekly and fully half opted out if a course requires writing more than 20 pages. Most students spent less than fourteen hours weekly studying and a significant portion of that time was spent studying with classmates (Arum, R. & Roksa, J., 2011). The implications are staggering. For as Arum noted in an interview, “You can’t have a democratic society when the elite—the college-educated kids—don’t have these abilities to think critically” (Jaschik, 2011).

But as significant as *Academically Adrift* may be, it does not begin to address the politics underlying the decline in critical thinking on campuses today. Yes, teachers spend much less time teaching and many more hours devoted to administrative responsibilities and getting published. Yes, students are not studying very much. Yes, today's undergraduates care more about "social engagement" than academic studies. But the decline of academic standards at colleges and universities today has much more to do with the consequences of the countercultural rebellion of the 1960s that by the late 1980s shifted the focus at institutions of higher learning from scholarly excellence to identity politics and political correctness at the expense of academic rigor. At the very heart of this issue are the "progressive" values that ensured the destruction of the Canon. This led to the imposition of relativistic norms that deflated standards, inflated grades, and ensured the triumph of partisan politics in academe at the expense of truth and excellence, thereby ensuring the demise of our educational standards.

It should be noted that the political bias today at university campuses—which it could be argued is largely responsible for the values that brought about the decline of academic rigor—is endemic. In 2005 a study by political scientists Stanley Rothman, S. Robert Lichter, and Neil Nevitte entitled "Politics and Professional Advancement Among College Faculty" published in *The Forum* concluded that ideological homogeneity at universities and colleges favored liberal and Democratic professors and harmed conservative and Republican faculty and that this liberal and Democratic concentration was even more evident at prestigious academic institutions than lesser ranked institutions. Their findings were that 72 percent of faculty teaching in American universities and colleges were liberal with only 15 percent identifying as conservative. When party affiliation was taken into account, 50 percent of those surveyed called themselves Democrats in contrast to only 11 percent who identified as Republicans. These results were based on a national survey of 1,643 full-time academics from 183 universities and colleges and derived from the 1999 North American Academic Study Survey (Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005).

In January of 2011 Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, asked attendees at the conference for the Society for Personality and Social Psychology gathered at the San Antonio Convention Center to specify their political preference. He estimated that 80 percent of his audience identified themselves as Liberals. Fewer than three dozen characterized themselves as Centrists or Libertarians. Only three of the 1,000 psychologists in the ballroom indicated they were conservatives (Tierney, 2011).

Contrast those numbers with the nation at large. A 2010 poll by Gallup suggested that fully 42% of Americans identified themselves as very conservative or conservative in contrast with only 20% who considered themselves as very liberal or liberal (Saad, 2010). The political bias on campuses has become so pronounced that scholarship and academic excellence has been imperiled.

Recently one graduate student said as much in a private e-mail to Haidt.

> I consider myself very middle-of-the-road politically: a social liberal but fiscal conservative. Nonetheless, I avoid the topic of politics around work. Given what I've read of the literature, I am certain any research I conducted in political psychology would provide contrary findings and, therefore, go unpublished. Although I think I could make a substantial contribution to the knowledge base, and would be excited to do so, I will not. (Tierney, 2011)

While this student's assessment is but one illustration, the implications of his words are staggering. Conservatives, who have been making this argument for years, resumed the battle in response to Haidt's recent comments (McArdle, 2011; Bromund, 2011). The truth is that students who are conservative face an adversarial climate in academe, prompting David Horowitz to establish Students for Academic Freedom in the Spring of 2003 (Students for Academic Freedom Timeline, 2006).

Many conservative students avoid an academic career out of concern for their professional future. Those that remain in academe realize that their careers are imperiled if they pursue research that is politically or intellectually at variance with that of their colleagues since peer review—the basis for both publication and tenure—determines their success or failure. For that reason, Haidt concluded, social psychologists—and arguably this would apply to most if not all associated faculty in the humanities—are a "tribal-moral community" whose "sacred values" impede research and impugn their credibility. Because the worldview of Liberal academics in the "tribal-moral community" is nearly monolithic, few dare voice their opposition. The result, Haidt argues, is a workplace that imposes severe impediments to academic excellence and critical thinking (Tierney, 2011).

But it is more than just the academy and its pervasive groupthink that threatens critical thinking and analytic reasoning. It is worse than the loss of our cultural heritage and a refusal to adhere to standards of excellence in our educational institutions. Now, we are becoming a society that no longer reads. This is particularly evident in the under-thirty generation who seldom read for pleasure and whose literacy is increasingly suspect. Thus when *To Read or Not To Read* was published by the NEA in 2007, the report acknowledged that the decline in reading appeared to be accelerating with the increased use of the Internet by 18-to-24-year-olds whose online participation between the years 1997-2003 soared to 53 percent. For those middle and high school students who were actually reading, more than half—58 percent—simultaneously utilized other media. Many students were actively engaged in multitasking while reading, which included any one or more of the following: watching TV, playing video or computer games, surfing the Web, engaging in instant messaging or e-mailing (*To Read or Not To Read*, 2007). The report was so dismal it prompted an article by Caleb Crain in *The New Yorker* entitled "Twilight of the Books". Crain noted, "Americans are losing not just the will to read but even the ability". Taking this argument to its consequential outcome, he then posed the unthinkable: "What will life be like if people stop reading?" (Crain, 2007, p. 134)

If Walter Ong celebrated our reinvented orality in the era of ascendant television (Ong, 1982), today's reality is far more apocalyptic—the specter of a people steeped in presentism and saturated with video and audio Internet stimulus who possess no critical thinking capabilities and struggle to understand even the most basic written language. The implications suggest a devolution back to the preconscious mind theorized by Julian Jaynes rather than Ong's earthly paradise. As the Nielsen Company reported, TV viewing for the 2008-09 season attained an all-time high with Americans averaging four hours and 49 minutes daily (Nielsenwire, 2009).

Yet as Elias Aboujaoude suggests in *Virtually You,* these figures did not account for the 15.3 hours spent weekly online in 2008—96 percent checking e-mail, 71 percent surfing the Internet, 60 percent obtaining online news, 43 percent seeking project information, 38 percent pursuing financial services, 37 percent engaging in instant messaging, 35 percent participating in online games, and 25 percent searching for humorous material. Social networking on the Web has grown increasingly important over the last few years. Seventy-

one percent of respondents suggested their online communities are very or extremely important and 55 percent ranked their online communities as significant as their offline interactions (Aboujaoude, 2011, v).

As reading increasingly migrates away from print to screen, Mark Bauerlein points out, "the linear, hierarchical, sequential thinking solicited by books has a shaky hold on the youthful mind, and as teens and young adults read linear texts in a linear fashion less and less, the less they engage in sustained linear thinking" (Bauerlein, 2008, p. 141). The result is multitasking, a hyperkinetic process of jumping from webpage to webpage that accelerates nonlinear thinking and imperils critical thinking. Furthermore, the World Wide Web offers its audience the ability to filter out all contradictory worldviews. The daily RSS feeds, the social networking on Facebook, the gaming and YouTube videos, the instant messaging, and the music downloads create an environment that all but annihilates contemplation, let alone analytical thinking. This prepackaged world, now rendered as "Daily Me", is a bulwark against all dissenting perspectives (Bauerlein, 2008).

The copy and paste mentality and the anonymity of the Internet facilitates the "borrowing" of ideas and content and greatly increases the possibility of plagiarism, as well as the merging of content with that of other writers who may or may not be attributed. Arguably this practice extends beyond plagiarism to become identity theft since these "borrowings" appropriate the signature ideas that encompass the essence of a writer's intellectual identity and compose his or her public persona. Perhaps no better representation of this trend is David Shields's "novel" *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, published in 2010. It consists of 618 paragraphs containing hundreds of quotations—more than half the novel—presented as his own. Only at the end of the book does he acknowledge these sources (Shields, 2010). Not only does this increasingly commonplace practice erode copyright, the very concept of authorial self comes under assault. For a younger generation of Internet users, it becomes doubtful whether they will acknowledge, let alone understand, the distinction between their own material and the cut and paste "borrowings"—best characterized as identity theft—that they post on their websites or insert into their documents.

What does it mean to be a "reader" on the Internet? The British Library commissioned a report, published in 2008, that sought to assess how young people accessed information on the Internet. Online readers were characterized as "promiscuous, diverse and volatile". Their search for content was seen as "horizontal, bouncing, checking and viewing in nature" with a predilection to "scan, flick and 'power browse'" through single digital material (Aboujaoude, 2011, p. 190). Reading on the Internet, as Jakob Nielsen's eye-tracking studies revealed, is more aptly characterized as scanning than reading since the eye skims across the top of a web page from left to right, moves quickly down the page, takes a second shorter horizontal sweep midway down followed by a leftward vertical lift at the bottom of the page as if following a superimposed *F* (Aboujaoude, 2011, Bauerlein, 2008). Michael Agger emphasized that readers on the Internet focus on bulleted lists, bold print, short sentences or fragments, and subheadings, favoring one idea per paragraph and utilizing numerous hypertext links (Aboujaoude, 2011).

Not surprisingly, newspaper mogul Rupert Murdock recently released his Internet based newspaper, *The Daily*, now available on Apple's iPad, the first of a new line of tablet computers designed for audio-visual content. This newspaper combines rudimentary text with ample hyperlinks, video, audio, and pictorial imagery. Not since the introduction of *USA Today* in 1982 has a newspaper made such a momentous transition. If *USA Today* introduced

America to a national print newspaper partitioned into easy-reading segments filled with color images and easy-to-digest articles, *The Daily* provides a globalized Internet-based news platform where words now serve as a handmaiden to digitalized video, audio, and hyperlinked content (Peters & Stelter, 2011).

As Elias Aboujaoude suggests in *Virtually You*, from this virtual universe emerges the e-personality, one that has migrated away from the primacy of books, thoughtful contemplation, and face-to-face human interaction to a reinvented self that need not observe the social constraints of the known world. Social inhibitions fall away. Impulses gain sway—gambling, sex, and financial indebtedness. The lack of intimacy and genuine relationships diminish empathy, social responsibility, and the spectrum of emotional responses characteristic of a well adjusted individual. Activity is ceaseless; one never need be alone. The opportunities for entertainment, invention, and superficial emotional gratification stoke the dream of unbounded financial gains. Measure these frivolous, vain, and malevolent pursuits against the lifelong struggle in the quest for intellectual enlightenment and the Internet fantasy trumps the Sisyphean endeavor every time. The e-personality presents the endless story of Me, one in which the id is boundless and the potential for grandiosity, narcissism, and addiction trump the moralizing, gravity-bound super-ego that is ever cognizant of the responsibilities of everyday life (Aboujaoude, 2011).

Conclusion

Let us accept the premise that critical thinking is a methodological approach to which all scholars and thinkers aspire. Nonetheless, by the late 1980s critical thinking on campuses was on the wane as "progressive" groupthink rejected the Western Canon and academic scholarship based on truth and excellence in favor of identity politics and social justice. It is important to acknowledge that worldview will determine the values that will frame perceptions as to what constitutes a good or bad argument. For this reason critical thinking is much more difficult to engage in than we might think. Let us also concede that someone trained in critical thinking appears more capable of undertaking a research project and presenting the basis of a good argument than an individual who has not been taught these stratagems. However, the mastering of a technique absent substantive knowledge of a discipline unmasks the facile nature of the enterprise. The result is someone who potentially looks smarter and presents a better argument by means of methodological rigor without ever immersing him or herself in the intellectual concepts under consideration (Nelson, 1990).

Where once scholars might have grappled with ideas for years simultaneously weighing contradictory beliefs and arguments while suspending personal judgment, today's academics are much more apt to rely on critical thinking techniques to deflate oppositional perspectives, thereby short circuiting this meaningful endeavor. Thus, the challenging and at times painful journey of discovery to confront and, if need be, reject one's deepest, most cherished beliefs is sabotaged at the outset.

Let us also acknowledge that critical thinking provides us with resources with which to tackle a problem although, strictly speaking, it is not a discipline. To use critical thinking effectively one must have expertise in at least one subject area and then apply the methodological techniques of critical thinking to that discipline. Otherwise, one quickly

becomes a gadfly deconstructing arguments absent an interpretative perspective with which to engage intellectual concepts.

Finally, let us dare to question whether having jettisoned our cultural and historical foundations in favor of short-sighted political agendas whether our students today possess even the ability to read anything but the simplest thoughts on a page, let alone the potential to engage in critical thinking. Without being steeped in a world of words, without understanding the ideas and writings of our greatest intellectuals, critical thinking is divested of all meaning: Its techniques achieve a pyrrhic victory in the classroom or the university at the expense of centuries of accumulated wisdom.

NOTES

i. As Anthony Grafton acknowledges in his essay "The Humanist as Reader", his work is a response to the writings of Erwin Panofsky, Hans Baron, and Eugenio Garin. Grafton suggests these historians regarded Renaissance humanists as nearly monolithic in their perspectives, at variance with the equally unified, although divergent, interpretations of medieval scholars. This analysis challenges their historical perspective while failing to acknowledge the limitations of Grafton's own revisionist scholarship.

ii. As a revisionist study *A History of Reading in the West* is at pains to deemphasize Engelsing's characterization of a transition begun in the second half of the 18th century in Europe from "intensive reading" to "extensive reading". Certainly, late 18th century and 19th century readers delved "intensely" in the imaginative literature they began to read. Nevertheless, Engelsing's terminology, marking as it does the shift from highly restricted access to books to a growing proliferation of reading materials, does highlight a change in reading practices in Europe, particularly among affluent citizens in regions that were relatively quick to industrialize.

iii. To understand our transformation from a manly aspirational culture to a feminized society dedicated to the pursuit of social justice at the expense of truth and excellence, consult my essays archived on my website, Literary Gulag, particularly "The 'Pink and White Tyranny' and Its Toll on Fiction" and "Literary Fiction and 'Adam's Curse'".

iv.

	1982	**1992**	**2002**
* 18-24-year-olds	59.8	53.3	42.8
* 25-34-year-olds	62.1	54.6	47.7
* 35-44-year-olds	59.7	58.9	46.6
* 45-54-year-olds	54.9	56.9	51.6
* 55-64-year-olds	52.8	52.9	48.9
* 65-74-year-olds	47.2	50.8	45.3

v. Elias Aboujaoude's figures on Internet use were taken from the 2008 assessment of the Center for the Digital Future, "Annual Internet Survey by the Center for the

Digital Future Finds Shifting Trends Among Adults About the Benefits and Consequences of Children Going Online" associated with the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

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