



THE  
EDGE  
OF  
THE  
PRECIPICE

Why Read Literature  
in the Digital Age?

*Edited by*

PAUL SOCKEN

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## The Edge of the Precipice



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Why Read Literature in the Digital Age?

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*For my wife, Rochelle, and my children and grandchildren*



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## The Edge of the Precipice



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## Introduction: A Return to the Educated Imagination

*Paul Socken*

I had been on the faculty of the University of Waterloo for thirty-seven years in the Department of French Studies when I retired in 2010. Colleagues in various departments in my university and elsewhere had been saying that students' background and abilities had been changing dramatically over the years and I experienced the phenomenon in my teaching.

Shortly before my retirement, I asked students how many read a newspaper in print or online: hardly any. I asked how many read literary texts, such as novels, poetry or short stories: very few. I asked how many read history or any other non-fiction: again, few. It became increasingly apparent that some fundamental change was taking place. Perhaps the change to a much vaunted visual society, a return to an oral culture supplemented by images on a screen, was well underway, as Marshall McLuhan had foreseen.

As a professor of literature, I had to wonder what was being lost in the process. I developed my own response, which this essay represents, but decided also to seek the insights of others – a diverse group of writers, academics, and those in other fields. I was fortunate enough to receive a favourable response from many. Included in this group are academics from around the world, an editor and writer, a philosopher, a librarian and library curator, a psychologist, young voices, and those who have worked in their fields for many years. The present volume is the result of my enquiry.

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I titled this collection *The Edge of the Precipice* from F. Scott Fitzgerald's collection of essays, *The Crack-Up*, published in 1945: "Draw your chair up close to the edge of the precipice and I will tell you a story." Why the edge of the precipice? Engaging in literary creativity and communication is adventurous – even risky – and challenging. The leap of the imagination into unknown worlds is like sitting at the edge of a precipice, glimpsing new vistas while remaining precariously connected to one's familiar surroundings. The acquired perspectives and views may challenge the old, may transform you, an exercise both exhilarating and forbidding.

I asked contributors to answer the question, "Why Read Literature in the Digital Age?" by focusing on reading as opposed to studying, literature as opposed to other forms of writing, and all of this in the context of current electronic technologies. What precisely is it that reading literature – even in our wired world of social networking, blogging, tweeting, Google, Wikipedia and so on – brings us? How do we benefit individually and collectively from this now ancient activity? Considering the answer to my own question, I decided to look again at the ideas of Canada's best-known literary critic, Northrop Frye. He gave a series of talks in the early 1960s as part of CBC Radio's Massey Lectures. Frye titled the series *The Educated Imagination*, and it was published in book form in 1963.<sup>1</sup> Although Frye was writing long before the advent of personal computers, he understood the necessity of defending literature even then, as the value of literature was already coming under attack from people who wanted it to have immediate political relevance or who criticized the humanities for having little economic value. I can think of no more eloquent defence of reading literature – or perhaps I should say, explanation of the importance of reading literature – then or now.

An important point that Frye makes is that "the literary writer isn't giving information ... he's trying to let something take on its own form ... That's why you can't produce literature voluntarily, in the way you'd write a letter or a report. That's also why it's no use telling the poet that he ought to write in a different way so you can understand him better. The writer of literature can only write what takes shape in his mind" (17). The literary enterprise is not one whose primary purpose is to convey a set of facts or data. It is the product of the writer's imagination and, as such, differs from other kinds of writing. The job of the writer is to put into words the thoughts and images that take shape in his or her

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own mind, and the reader's engagement with those words is the exciting intellectual pursuit called reading.

Professors of literature tell their students that the writer's words create a world – the French call it a “univers romanesque” – and that they are invited to enter that world and to explore it fully. That world is different than their own and the readers must “suspend disbelief,” to use Coleridge's term, to experience it. The readers' understanding will expand and they will be enriched. They are not obligated to like the work in question, only to understand it before judging. It is the exploration of the writer's imagined world by the reader's open mind that defines the purpose of literature.

Consider historical non-fiction as a contrast. The historian says such and such a battle took place in a particular year and is judged by the accuracy of his statement. The poet's job, Frye says, “is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place. He gives you the typical, recurring, or what Aristotle calls universal event. You wouldn't go to Macbeth to learn about the history of Scotland – you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he's gained a kingdom and lost his soul” (24). Likewise, you go to Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* to learn what it feels like to be a child, orphaned and deprived of love, who finds himself and gains wisdom in a harsh world. As Frye points out, Dickens didn't know Micawber or maybe even anyone like him, but you sense that there's something of Micawber in everyone. To suggest that literature is unique is not to claim that history or any other discipline is inferior. It is merely to postulate that literature's hold on the imagination of the reader is powerful, creative, engaging and mind-expanding. This proud claim is critically important.

“As civilisation develops,” says Frye, “we become more preoccupied with human life, and less conscious of our relation to non-human nature. Literature reflects this, and the more advanced the civilisation, the more literature seems to concern itself with purely human problems and conflicts. The gods and heroes of the old myths fade away and give place to people like ourselves. In Shakespeare we can still have heroes who can see ghosts and talk in magnificent poetry, but by the time we get to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* they're speaking prose and have turned into ghosts themselves” (22). The problems of human nature and human existence, however, have not changed – “literature is still doing the same

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job that mythology did earlier” – and literature remains as a fundamental means to mediate human life and the way it deals with the world in which it operates. The techniques and language necessarily change, but the essential work of literature, its projection of human issues and concerns onto the external landscape, remains.

Classical literature still does have enormous importance and appeal. Homer’s Achilles has nothing ostensibly modern about him. He is a hero in the mythic sense. In Frye’s words: “Achilles is more than any man could be, because he’s also what a man wishes he could be ... he’s a great smouldering force of human desire and frustration and discontent, something we all have in us too, part of mankind as a whole. Nobody cares now about the historical Achilles, if there ever was one, but the mythical Achilles reflects a part of our own lives” (25). We are not reading literature to learn about the factual details of the Trojan War but for other reasons. Ancient literature, as exotic and different from our society as it may be, reflects part of the universal human condition and, as such, never loses its relevance.

If literature is about the world of the imagined, where anything can and does take place, what is its value? We have already seen that this literary world reveals us to ourselves and expands the mind’s horizons. Frye adds to this list “the encouragement of tolerance. Bigots and fanatics seldom have any use for the arts.” He does admit that a negative outcome could be diletantism, but dismisses this as less common and less dangerous. I would add the fact that some of the leading lights of the Nazi ideology were prominent academics, so no one could argue that the educated imagination is guaranteed to be free of prejudice or bigotry, only that one has the right to expect that it will more likely be sensitive and compassionate. Indeed, literature doesn’t come with guarantees of accompanying compassion as the anti-Semitism of Pound, Eliot, and Céline sadly demonstrate. Frye speaks only of possibilities and expectations. Literature is not religion, and offers no belief system, no panacea, yet “if we shut the vision of it completely out of our minds ... something goes dead inside us, perhaps the one thing that it’s really important to keep alive” (33).

I do not mean to suggest – and Frye certainly was not promoting – the idea that literature is primarily an exercise in moral development. Teachers of literature at all levels take great pains to demonstrate that literature incorporates history, sociology and other domains, but is first and foremost an aesthetic experience. Literary techniques are studied

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in detail to illustrate how, for example, the careful choice of words or images, the development of character, the structure of the work illuminate the work from within and create its beauty and meaning. The French have an expression – “forme et fond” (style and content) – which means that form or expression and content are inextricably linked. Any separation would be artificial. Frye’s discussion constitutes only one aspect of the complex and nuanced pursuit which is the reading of literature.

Literature is mostly a serious undertaking. Think of the chronicling of society by Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola. In literature, “we always seem to be looking either up or down” (40). Whether it deals with social issues, is mythic in nature or otherwise, literature requires an engagement with the “real world” but differently from other forms of writing. Frye uses the example of the scene in *King Lear* where Gloucester’s eyes are put out. The audience knows full well that a real blinding is not taking place: “In a dramatic scene of cruelty and hatred, we’re seeing cruelty and hatred, which we know are permanently real things in human life, from the point of view of the imagination. What the imagination suggests is horror, not the paralyzing sickening horror of a real blinding scene, but an exuberant horror, full of the energy of repudiation. This is as powerful a rendering as we can ever get of life as we don’t want it” (41). Repudiation, life as we don’t want it – this is the realism of literature. It isn’t life; it’s a statement on life, sometimes positive, usually negative. It forces the reader or viewer to confront a fiction which rings true. Or, as Picasso put it, “art is a lie that makes us realize truth.” It is that truth that all art attempts to reveal.

Frye writes that some people believe that Shakespeare could not possibly have written the works ascribed to him because they think that literature comes from lived experience. An actor from a small town in the English Midlands could not, they think, have experienced life in royal courts or Italian cities. They don’t understand that literature is a product of the imagination. Literature is two dreams, “a wish-fulfillment dream and an anxiety dream, that are focused together, like a pair of glasses, and become a fully conscious vision. Art, according to Plato, is a dream for awakened minds, a work of imagination withdrawn from ordinary life, dominated by the same forces that dominate the dream, and yet giving us a perspective and dimension on reality that we don’t get from any other approach to reality” (43). Frye calls literature man’s revelation to man, which I take to mean a kind of secular sharing of truth revealed through the imagination.



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The other arts – painting and music, for example – are intrinsically valuable but can also be considered part of literary training in that they, too, are constructs of the human imagination. We study literature separately from music, and music separately from painting, etc., each discipline self-contained, and we often forget about the organic whole – the culture that produced all of these expressions of the human imagination of that era. The triumph of Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation*<sup>2</sup> is his singular success in explaining the spirit of the great ages and periods of western civilization through the variety of artistic expression. Clark examines in detail the architecture, music, sculpture, and art of each era as the manifestation of the spirit of the age. The endeavour was first a television series and the book is the transcript of those programmes. I refer here to Kenneth Clark’s marvellous achievement because it is an important reminder that literature is part of a vital human enterprise of expression that gives meaning and purpose to all that society undertakes.<sup>3</sup>

As Shelley’s “Ozymandius” reminds us, all we have left of past civilizations is not conquest, not people, not treasure, but words, paintings, architecture, sculpture and music.

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert ... Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed,  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandius, King of Kings,  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Contrasting the antique king’s sneer and arrogance is the nothing that remains. Even the sculpture of the king is a “colossal wreck.” Reading the poem aloud (the “b” in “boundless and bare,” the “l” of “lone and level,” the “s” of “sands stretch”) helps to emphasize the mocking tone

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of the poet who undermines the idea that earthly power and the objects of empire have any lasting presence or influence. It is art that is the sum total of the best that has been thought and done. It is the poem that remains to ridicule the pretension of the king.

Frye would have decried the notion of literature as “useful” or “relevant” as so many people today expect art to be, but he did see a social vision at the heart of literary study: “The fundamental job of the imagination in ordinary life, then, is to produce, out of the society we live in, a vision of the society we want to live in” (60). Living as we do in a society of advertising, cliché, and jargon, we must cultivate the use of language and expression in order to remain free: “You see, freedom has nothing to do with lack of training; it can only be the product of training. You’re not free to move unless you’ve learned to walk, and not free to play the piano unless you practise. Nobody is capable of free speech unless he knows how to use language, and such knowledge is not a gift: it has to be learned and worked at” (64).

To sum up Frye’s idea of what constitutes the educated imagination, one would have to conclude that the imagination – and it is the literary imagination in particular that is under discussion here – deals with what is the most profoundly and uniquely human aspect of our lives. The imagination that is sensitized through contact with literature – in other words, educated – demonstrates certain characteristics. It experiences a personal engagement with the writer’s world, knows what it feels like to inhabit another person’s moral universe, reflects on the human condition and, one has reason to hope, enables a person to become a more tolerant and worldly citizen. Such a reader has “seen” through the eyes of the writer a truth that humanizes and, in some cases, motivates to action, the sensitive reader. It is this perhaps overly idealized view of reading that Frye refers to as man’s revelation to man. Overly idealized or not, it deserves reconsideration. Not all literature does this or even aspires to do this. However, the mere fact that it can perform this function enriches and ennobles the literary effort.

## Notes

- 1 *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), 1963.

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2 BBC Books, 1969.

3 Clark is not without his critics – in the words of one, his inability to contemplate the idea that there could be a symbiotic relationship between culture and oppression is a weakness – but his view of cultural expression as part of a totality is an important idea.

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## Technology, Science, and the Book





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## Why I Read *War and Peace* on a Kindle (and Bought the Book When I Was Done)

*Michael Austin*

Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.

Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library"

The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology.

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

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*War and Peace* has long been a name to conjure with. Though not the lengthiest European novel, or even the most complex, Tolstoy's masterpiece functions in highbrow circles as the book of books – a shorthand way of summing up all of the qualities that make a work of literature great. In other circles, it functions primarily as a negative – much like the profession of rocket science. To say that a book is "not *War and Peace*" is to say that it lacks literary heft. A young novelist, for example, might propose her first book to a publisher by saying, "it's not *War and Peace*, but it does tell a good story." And years later, the same publisher might write back something like, "you don't have to write *War and Peace*, you know, just get us a manuscript."

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As we shift into an Internet culture, “not *War and Peace*” is quickly becoming part of the standard profile for new media technologies. In his very smart book *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr quotes several Internet-age opinions on the venerable Russian classic. “No one reads *War and Peace*,” according to a blog post by NYU scholar Clay Shirky, “it’s too long, and not so interesting,” and the fascination that it held for previous generations was “just a side-effect of living in an environment of impoverished access” (111). Even more startling is the confession of Bruce Friedman, a pathologist at the University of Michigan Medical School: “I can’t read *War and Peace* anymore ... I’ve lost the ability to do that. Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it” (7). The smart money in the academy says that *War and Peace* – and all it represents – will soon be shoved unceremoniously aside to make room for the wonders of the digital age.

Until very recently, I had never read *War and Peace* myself, despite being a long-time admirer of *War-and-Peace*-like things (including the even-longer novel *Clarissa*, by Samuel Richardson, for whom my only daughter is named). Like most academics I have a contrarian nature, and news of Tolstoy’s impending demise only made me want to read his greatest masterpiece more. And assertions of its fundamental incompatibility with the digital age made me want to do something radical: to read it on my Amazon Kindle – an extravagant purchase that I justified to myself, and my wife, with the assertion that it would allow me to save money and shelf space by downloading and reading free classics from the Internet. By using a digital-age device to read one of the print age’s greatest classics, I reasoned, I could do my part to bridge the gap – to demonstrate (at least to myself) that great old literature and awesome new technology can co-exist peacefully in the age of Apple and Amazon.

I have always had some desire to read *War and Peace*, for the same reasons that younger, thinner people want to climb Mt. Everest – because it is big, because it is famous, and because most people will never do it. Over the years, I made several abortive attempts, but I never made it beyond the first few chapters. When I became a Kindle owner, however, I ran out of excuses and decided to take the plunge. But I did not take this step lightly. Like a mountain climber, I started training months in advance. I read several “lesser” Russian novels – both *Anna Karenina* and *The Brothers Karamazov* – just to get the hang of the genre (I did not realize, for example, that every character in a Russian novel has six differ-

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ent names, which took a lot of getting used to). I downloaded a *War and Peace* study guide, also for the Kindle, and I used the “preview” function to download the first chapters of several different translations so that I could choose the best. After much deliberation, I purchased and downloaded the highly recommended new translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, published by Vintage classics in 2007 (so much for the idea of free classics). And then I was off. I devoted all of my non-work time for six weeks, from 1 July to 15 August 2010, to a single task: reading *War and Peace* on my Kindle.

I do enjoy the Kindle reading experience – it is a perfect platform for somebody who likes both new gadgets and old books. The screen functions more like a high-tech Etch-a-Sketch than a computer monitor – its uses a magnetic ink, rather than light pixels, and the result is something very much like a book. The Kindle’s scalable text allows me to make the words large enough to read without my glasses, and the adjustable column width makes the text narrow enough to support the speed-reading techniques that I studied in college. For six weeks I took my Kindle everywhere, and, whenever anyone asked, I proudly affirmed that I was reading nothing less than *War and Peace*.

But it was the novel, not the device that made the experience perfect. The six weeks that I spent with Tolstoy were filled with revelations. I loved both the sweeping story of Napoleon’s invasion and the smaller, domestic narratives that fit inside of the larger plot. I was intellectually engaged by the author’s long digressions on history and narrative, and I discovered in Tolstoy a new favourite character: General Mikhail Kutuzov, the Russian general who defeated Napoleon without ever winning a battle. Kutuzov won by looking far ahead and seeing that the Grand Army would be defeated by circumstances already in play – the rough terrain, the overextended supply line, and the Russian winter. The only way he could lose was to give Napoleon the combat that he so desperately wanted. By refusing to fight an unnecessary battle, Kutuzov won a total victory. I can’t imagine a better model for an academic administrator, and, since reading it, I have tried hard to bring the spirit of Kutozovism into my own leadership roles.

*War and Peace* conveyed more moments of insight, not to mention genuine pleasure, than I could possibly discuss in a brief essay. I enjoyed it immensely, and I especially enjoyed the experience of reading it on a digital device. But when I clicked on the last screen and put my



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