# Hercule Poirot Investigates: The Pyrrhic Victory of Technology and 21st Century Reading Practices or The Death of the Literary Mind

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## Abstract

Employing a synthesis of recent neuroscience research, cultural criticism, and the creative symbolism of Agatha Christie's famous detective, Hercule Poirot, "Hercule Poirot Investigates: The Pyrrhic Victory of Technology and 21st Century Reading Practices or The Death of the Literary Mind," theorizes that technology use and value conflict within English departments has resulted in a generation of reading professionals who are ill equipped to continue the work of the discipline.

*Keywords:* Literary mind, deep reading, neuroscience, value conflict

Early in *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr (2010) quotes Duke University professor, Katherine Hayles' talk, given at a Phi Beta Kappa meeting: "I can't get my students to read whole books anymore." About which Carr then comments, with not a little subtextual incredulity, "She teaches English; the students she's talking about are students of literature" (p. 9). The implication is clear: we've given up entirely the notion that *most* people will read books, but there is also growing evidence that even those who seek to be professional readers—future scholars, teachers, librarians, creative writers, literary journalists—are losing the ability to do so. No doubt many readers of this essay could add their own anecdotal evidence to that provided by Professor Hayles, evidence that goes beyond questions of motivation and ventures into whether or not students of literature any longer possess the kinds of brains necessary not only to complete a book, but to comprehend it with nuance and specificity, tying the ideas and aesthetic of one text to those found in others.

What's at stake here is nothing less than the literary mind—a brain that demonstrates a certain collection of habits and skills which allow the kind of "deep reading" the profession has long held essential to success. These characteristics developed with the rise of the print book and the advent of silent reading, performed by a single individual. It is a mind that is calm, focused, undistracted, a mind not only capable but eager to fall into what novelist and critic John Gardner called the "narrative dream," a state of immersion in a fictional text so complete that it is as if the "real" world has fallen away and been replaced in the reader's mind by the world on the page. Often, it's this experience that people refer to when they say that they *love a book* or *never want a story to end*. Every book lover has had this experience and knows how precarious that delicious state of immersion can be—there are so many potential distractions, never more so than today. And so a concerned professor, like Katherine Hayles, might ask themselves what's going on. Who or what is responsible for the death of the literary mind?

**An Investigation:**

In Agatha Christie's (1933) novel, *13 at Dinner*, Lord Edgware is discovered murdered in his library—a long, slim penknife expertly inserted "in the back of the neck just at the roots of the hair" (p. 43), and so entering directly into the brain. It is a crime committed with an almost technical precision. The prime suspect? His wife, Jane Wilkinson (Lady Edgware), who was seen entering the library just around the time of death and was known to possess ample motive to want her husband dead. The problem for Chief Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard is that Lady Edgware has an alibi—she was reported as having been at dinner with Sir Montagu Corner and a large party of guests at his house along the river in Chiswick. How could she have been identified in two places at once? One woman clearly must be an imposter. But which one? Did the murderer want to pin the blame on Jane Wilkinson and so get away with the crime? Or was Jane guilty of murder, having somehow engineered this charade to clear her of suspicion? Quite a nice little puzzle to be solved, and so the services of Christie's greatest fictional creation, the Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, are called upon. In due course, Poirot embarks on his investigation, interviewing suspects and evaluating evidence, agitating his famous "little grey cells," because Poirot, unlike other more physically vigorous detectives, does not crawl upon the ground with a magnifying glass to look at footprints or measure cigar ash. No, he sits quietly and thinks. At one point in the investigation of Lord Edgware's murder, Poirot turns to his associate Captain Hastings, raises his hand, and says that all he needs to solve the crime is the answer to five questions. Let us now ask five questions of our own in the investigation of the death of the literary mind—a crime that has also been committed with technical precision, by a murderer with a strong motive, and with the help of an imposter.

**Question One:  What Do We Know About the Victim?**

The literary mind is something of a miracle, as the human brain isn't intrinsically "wired" for reading. There are parts of the brain that specifically allow for sight, auditory function, and speech, but not for reading or writing. These acts are possible only through virtue of the brain's neuroplasticity and our own hard work. Most researchers cite the development of the Greek alphabet as the real beginning of literacy, providing for the first time enough consonants and vowels to reproduce all the nuances of spoken language. Nevertheless, the process of reading is such a complex brain function (forging connections between and among different discrete parts of the brain) that it takes most people up to seven years to become competent readers, meaning for the most part simply decoders of language. Maryanne Wolf (2007) in *Proust and the Squid* identifies five types of readers: "(1) emerging pre-reader, (2) novice reader, (3) decoding reader, (4) fluent comprehending reader, and (5) expert reader" (p. 115). The literary mind is the apex here and relies on even further conditions being met. Even the fluent reader employs the brain's development of "automaticity"—the ability to instantaneously see a word and decode it—to allow them enough time to think about what they've read. Wolf, however, explains that fluency goes beyond the advantage of speed provided by automaticity:

> Fluency is not a matter of speed; it is a matter of being able to utilize all the special knowledge a child has about a word—its letters, letter patterns, meanings, grammatical functions, roots, and endings—fast enough to have time to think and comprehend…The point of becoming fluent, therefore, is to read—really read—and understand. (p. 131)

To make the move to expert reader, a person who is conducting deep reading requires these same conditions—time and attention to context—but to a tremendously greater degree. There can come a moment during which a sophisticated reader is able to decode a passage and understand its meaning, but then also begin to move "beyond the information given" and interpret a subtextual meaning. The speed with which the best readers are able to make this move ultimately allows them time to think, and in so doing make emotional and intellectual connections with their own lives and with other texts. For the mind trained in literary studies this ought to begin to include a highly evolved understanding of ideas related to prose and poetry, especially elements of characterization, metaphor, voice, etc. In many ways what we're doing is simply learning how to pay attention, which is then rewarded with the sparks of implicit knowledge about what we read. In the 1970s, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) studied practitioners in art, music, dance, and literature to understand how these figures attained such high levels of achievement in fields that rarely provided any hope of traditional reward. The concept that resulted from this study, what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as "flow," describes a state where "a person is fully concentrated on the task at hand. There is a feeling that action and awareness merge in a single beam of focused consciousness" (p. 24). The question is always, how does one develop this kind of focus and expertise? Knowing rules, conventions, and definitions isn't enough. In my experience, and in the experience of many writers and reading scholars, only immersion in language engenders this kind of fluency—this "flow." We must read (and write) voraciously. As a professor of creative writing, I am often asked by students how to face down the blank page or deal with writer's block, and my answer is always the same: be patient, the more you write the easier it becomes. In other words, the deeper we immerse ourselves in language the faster we make connections, recognize connotations and context clues, the more easily we activate the seeming magic of what our brains can do with language. And of course the more we read, the greater our literary storehouse of language, and so the more sophisticated our work with the page. Truly expert readers are rich with language. Indeed many bibliophiles can look at their bookshelves and see their lives reflected back at them; each book contains within its covers a memory, an experience, or an inspiration that comes out of the content or aesthetic (often both) of the text. In his essay, "The Noblest Distraction," Joseph Epstein (2007) writes, "Reading is an experience. A biography of any literate person ought to deal at length with what he read and when, for in some sense, we are what we read" (p. 125). However, this can only become true when we read with the appropriate quality of attention—to skim a novel is not to make it one's own.

More importantly, those with truly developed literary minds discuss the experience of reading in almost sacred terms. Reading is not simply a means to an end such as the acquisition of information or the ability to solve some particular problem, but a key to true knowledge, perhaps even wisdom—ideas that should be importantly differentiated from information—and living a rich inner life, to be as Henry James suggested, "a person upon whom nothing is lost."

In her essay, "True Confessions of a Reader," novelist Lynn Sharon Schwarz (2007) describes a friend who worked in publishing and who seemed to have read everything, simply not understanding how she did it. How could she read all those manuscripts for her job *and* read all those novels of the moment that everyone was discussing at coffee shops and dinner parties? And then she realized the simple truth: her friend was lying, she wasn't reading all those books. Instead, she was skimming or reading summaries and reviews, pulling out some important bits from the text the way that smart people can when they want to, and so seeming to possess at her

fingertips a comprehensive knowledge of contemporary literature. Schwartz wasn't angry when she made this realization, nor did she feel duped. Nevertheless, she recognized the ersatz nature of her friend's "reading" and asked herself, "What had been lost, after all?" The answer: "Only the actual experience, the long slow being with a book, feeling the shape of the words, their roll and tumble in the ear" (p. 131). Too often these days when discussing books someone will ask for the "takeaway" of a particular title, and aspiring writers are advised to prepare an "elevator pitch" that succinctly describes their books to agents, editors, and even to potential readers. It is a desire to get information in the way that reflects the speed and staccato method of the digital world. And yet this kind of thinking has nothing to do with the literary mind and how it works. Rather, the literary mind is much more attuned to the ideas reflected in Schwartz's language: a slow pace during which a genuine relationship can be built with the text, including an interest in the aesthetics associated with language—not just a 90-second brief on the main points of theme.

Perhaps the richest feature of the literary mind is its ability to develop empathy and transform our perspectives. The editor and critic Sven Birkerts (2007) in "Notes from a Confession" suggests that the deep reader possesses an "intimate detachment" with a different "orientation to time," one in which it is possible to achieve a state of mind in which we are both aware of ourselves as readers but also very much "in" the imagined world of the novel or poem. Far from being disengaged from the real world—whatever that might mean—Birkerts believes this phenomenon of reading provides a kind of double vision that allows for seeing the world from a broader perspective:

> I *feel* most real, most *in the world*, when I can achieve double vision. When I am able, in other words, to compound involvement with detachment. That exquisite blend: to be engrossed in a certain action within a larger perspective…I read the book because of what happens to me when I read it, because it makes me feel a certain way about my life. It allows me to concentrate on aspects of the real that otherwise elude me. (p. 140)

Birkerts understands that the literary mind is transformed when engrossed in a book, and that it is capable through time and focus, through a silence and solitude that is often thought of as frankly unnatural in the twenty-first century, of emotional and intellectual understanding of the larger world. And in a process that continues to be almost alchemical in its strangeness, despite all that neuroscience can teach us, deep reading—the very hallmark of the literary mind—can transform this understanding into that most prized of all academic achievements, what the classicist Eric Havelock calls *novel thought*.

## Question Two:  What was the Murder Weapon?

If part of the pleasure in reading a mystery novel is the way that a detective like Hercule Poirot can step into the midst of chaos and with the application of logic—*order and method,* as the Belgian is fond of saying—put the world right again and see justice served, then there is also for the reader the somewhat perverse fascination with the weapon that committed the crime. See then Poirot bending to pick up with his handkerchief the bloody knife, or carefully removing the stopper to sniff at the nearly empty vial of poison. We are moved by the horror of murder, but cannot look away from the instrument. So look we must.

The most essential element in the death of the literary mind then is a lack of immersion in language, a condition that many reading specialists such as Maryanne Wolf (2007) refer to as "word poverty." There is clear evidence that demonstrates that families who keep books in the house raise children who are good readers, in part by passing on to those children the idea that books are both a valuable and normal aspect of life. Increasingly, however, especially after children have become fluent, though not expert readers, the books are replaced with some kind of personal technology device—laptop computers, tablets, and cell phones.

These devices have tremendous allure. They engage us with elements that human beings are "hard-wired" to like such as images and sound. And they appeal to our inherently social nature, keeping us at least in superficial ways constantly connected to people and to the world around us. They are remarkable devices because they provide access to the Internet, which in turn supplies us with an almost comprehensive access to the world. They are what the British scientist Alan Turing referred to as "universal machines." As we know, young people are most deeply engaged in technology use, the current generation of students being the first to have always had access to the World Wide Web. When we combine the amount of time people spend surfing the web, sending text messages, using computers for school and work, and then add to that the time people still spend watching television, the amount of daily screen time is truly staggering.

What's really interesting is the way we engage with this screen time. With the whole world at our fingertips, it's no longer common to engage with one thing, finish with it, and then engage with whatever strikes our fancy next. Instead, we borrow the modern corporate value of multitasking and engage with several different things at once. A few years ago when I first started to notice a change in my students' abilities and became interested in the potential effect of technology on the literary mind, I started to ask my classes a series of questions about their computer habits, the most basic being: How many browser tabs do you typically have open on your computer at any given time? The most common answer was between 4-12 tabs open at once. They were listening to music, had Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram open, Blackboard to check on the details of their assignment, a PDF of the reading for that week, a Word document upon which they'd begun to draft said assignment, and a sports site so they could track the score of their favorite team. It is a beautiful display of the power and the range of choice that the Internet provides to users. At the same time, it also creates what I've started to call the "buffet effect."

When we first enter a buffet-style restaurant, especially if we're hungry, our desire is to eat everything, sampling dish after dish, never having to choose or make a decision and so cut ourselves off from possibility. The reality, however, is that we are constrained by the limits of our stomachs. Many of us pull back of course, maybe a little sadly, and enjoy what we can, which is often quite a lot. Meanwhile others eat to capacity and often beyond, leaving the restaurant feeling sick and regretful. This buffet anecdote mirrors the way we engage with information online. There are limits not only to our stomachs, but also to the attention our brains can give to the deluge of information coming to us through our computer screens.

Nicholas Carr (2010) employs his own metaphor to discuss the effect that working with computers has had on his mind. In his *Atlantic* article, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" and subsequent book, *The Shallows*, he describes how he realized that his brain felt different than it

used to, and that he wasn't able to pay attention to things for a long period of time anymore. In the past, he'd been able to concentrate for hours on book-length manuscripts or conduct exhaustive library research, but he now felt the regular need for new stimulus, the little chemical high we all now understand, through a quick click on social media to check on "likes" or "retweets" or simply to follow whatever stray thought happens to pop into our heads: When is Justin Bieber coming to Memphis? How much are the tickets? How late does the new IKEA stay open? I often spend quite a bit of time online and then forget what it was that brought me there in the first place, following the white rabbit of my thoughts down the hole. For Carr, this is the very nature of the way that the Internet distributes information:

> Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski. (p. 7)

Carr now realizes that he shouldn't have been surprised by this development to his thinking. Media critics such as Marshall McLuhan have been warning the academy that a new technology, a *new medium*, not only brings with it new content, but a new way of receiving and absorbing that content. Famously, "The medium is the message." An idea so well known to us it should be second nature. And yet we become so dazzled by the potential bounty of the buffet that it seems silly to resist.

"Dazzled" I have just called it, but "overwhelmed" would be a more accurate description of what happens to our brains when we're on our digital devices. As it turns out, the very neuroplasticity that allowed humans to develop the ability to read also allows new neural pathways to be developed in the brain that reflect our computer use—regardless of age. Even as little as one hour per day for five days can create new habits, transforming the novice digital user into a sophisticate. In seemingly no time at all, we're clicking and sliding from site to site and exposing ourselves to the hard, bright online world. Unfortunately, online reading is especially taxing. "The need to evaluate links and make related navigational choices, while also processing a multiplicity of fleeting sensory stimuli, requires constant mental coordination and decision-making" (Carr, 2010, p. 122). And so total access and digital fluency come at a price. According to Carr (2010), "The Net's cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively. Our brains turn into simple signal-processing units, quickly shepherding information into consciousness and then back out again" (p. 119). So many stimuli are bombarding the brain with information that must be processed, first into short-term memory and then in a more time consuming and difficult process, into long-term memory, though it should be noted that according to Carr's research very little online information actually makes it into long-term memory. It is this bombardment that leaves computer users feeling fatigued and overwhelmed.

Based on this analysis of what happens to the brain while working online, many readers might suggest that we simply disable the Wi-Fi and turn off the Internet. Fewer distractions, just the user and her PDF or downloaded eBook glowing on the screen of the device. In fact, many critics of Carr's findings suggested just that—individual users should simply use computers responsibly. Unfortunately, those pesky neural pathways now dedicated to computer use get in the way. We have habituated our minds to a particular way of reading online. In 2006, a web design consultant named Jakob Nielsen conducted an eye-tracking study of web users, the results

of which were later confirmed by a subsequent eye-tracking study carried out at the Software Usability Research Laboratory at Wichita State University. This is what they discovered:

> The vast majority skimmed the text quickly, their eyes skipping down the page in a pattern that resembled, roughly, the letter *F*. They'd start by glancing all the way across the first two or three lines of text. Then their eyes would drop down a bit, and they'd scan about halfway across a few more lines. Finally, they'd let their eyes cursorily drift a little farther down the left-hand side of the page. (Carr, 2010, p. 135)

More disturbing still is that we not only engage in what Carr terms "power browsing" but we also bring this screen habit with us wherever we go in the digital world, traveling from screen to screen. Even when we tell ourselves that we want to read a PDF of an article about Walter Benjamin on our laptop differently from the concert information presented on Justin Bieber's website, we don't. And let's be honest, most people do not disable the Wi-Fi on their devices and try to recreate the immersive reading experience provided to us by printed text. We're so used to the constant stimuli—the happy distractions of the Internet—that we crave their moment-to-moment presence in our lives.

Consider then the effect of these conditions—the changes in our brain based on nearly ceaseless online connection and the new context within which most people approach the act of reading—on the literary mind. It continues to be a brain that is capable of fluency, decoding and basic comprehension are not too seriously impaired, but deep reading becomes either impossible or is attained only as the result of Herculean mental effort. It results in the kind of experience that Carr and others report: their brains "feel" different than they used to, and deep engagement with a text is simply exhausting. Of course, what Baby-Boomers like Carr are describing is the loss of a previously acquired skill. For younger readers, the literary mind has before it an almost insurmountable block to its development.

## Question Three: A Red Herring

Many have begun to realize, or at least suspect, that something dangerous is happening with the nearly ubiquitous presence of computers and the screen time we devote to them and to other digital devices—namely, that the very object of alleged intellectual progress is at the same time fantastically detrimental to the deep-thinking brains that allowed for their development. According to Carr (2010), the argument that technology influences human behavior is what economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen called "technological determinism" (p. 46), and it's an idea whose time has come. Existing only as a compelling theory during Veblen's career in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern neuroscience, especially brain mapping, has largely demonstrated that the activities we engage in—such as reading a print book or navigating a website on the Internet—creates physical changes to the brain and therefore exerts influence on how we think and feel.

Recently, in a *New York Times* article titled, "Moguls and Killer Robots," Cade Metz (2018) reported on what was termed a feud between Silicon Valley innovators Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg regarding their opinions of the continuing development of artificial intelligence. Musk has very publically come out as saying that artificial intelligence is "potentially more dangerous than nukes" (p. 1), while Zuckerberg and his Facebook team disagree. In late 2014, Zuckerberg invited Musk to dinner in order to persuade him of his point

of view—he failed. Metz sums up Musk's attitude succinctly: "Let's for once, he was saying to the rest of the tech industry, consider the unintended consequences of what we are creating before we unleash it on the world" (p. 1). This small nod to caution has behind it the clear understanding among technology innovators that determinism is real, so much so that they often go out of their way to protect their own families from the unintended consequences of their devices, the most famous of which is the limitations that Steve Jobs placed on his own children's screen time and a suggestion in a recent *New York Times Book Review* article by Gal Beckerman (2018) titled, "Kicking the Geeks Where it Hurts," that the practice of limiting children's screen time is wide-spread in Silicon Valley:

> Hypocrisy thrives at the Waldorf School of the Peninsula in the heart of Silicon Valley. This is where Google executives send their children to learn how to knit, write with chalk on blackboards, practice new words by playing catch with a beanbag and fractions by cutting up quesadillas and apples. There are no screens—not a single piece of interactive, multimedia, educational content…when it comes to their own families…the new masters of the universe have a different sense of what it takes to learn and innovate—it's a slow, indirect process, meandering not running, allowing for failure and serendipity, even boredom. (p. 14)

Nevertheless, most technophiles continue to deny determinism and instead look at our digital devices simply as tools—"neutral artifacts"—that obey us rather than exert influence. Much of this "instrumentalist position" (Carr, 2010, p. 46) is wrapped up in the American mytho-poetics of the individual. It's a powerful conception linked to the ability to exercise free will and, at the very least, control our personal fates. As Carr (2010) reminds us, "The idea that we're somehow controlled by our tools is anathema to people" (p. 46). We see it over and over again in our culture, and especially in how it's tied to what objects we spend our money on and therefore what we surround ourselves with. Consumers want to believe that what they buy represents them, demonstrates aspects of a carefully curated individual identity. The notion that the agency actually lies with the device—or, rather its corporate creators—is something that makes us deeply uneasy.

One might then naturally see the crux of this issue as a potent debate between determinism and instrumentalism, and so believe that the key to inspiring change lies in whether or not technophiles can be made to see and admit the neurological influences their "tools" are exerting, especially when it comes to technologies that change the way we interact with language—arguably the "primary vessel of conscious thought, particularly higher forms of thought" (Carr, 2010, p. 51). However, I can see Poirot twirling his famous mustaches and sadly shaking his head, because while determinism and instrumentalism certainly help to describe important conditions that are involved in the death of the literary mind, they are ultimately a Red Herring.

**Question Four:  Why Does No One Care about the Death of the Literary Mind?**

A clearer idea of what's at stake with the death of the literary mind and why so many reading professionals—again, scholars, teachers, librarians, creative writers, literary journalists—have turned away from books and the kind of mind they engender can only be understood through an examination of values. Certainly, one reason is that they hold an instrumentalist view of computers and other digital technologies. They have not read the

neuroscience—few have—and easily dismiss print advocates as Luddites, nice people who are simply out of step with the times. To their minds a print book and an eBook are the same—only the method of delivery, the medium, has changed. Despite all the images of the scholar in her study surrounded by books, they do not view them as a "sacred value." In *The Politics of Sacred Rhetoric*, political scientist Morgan Marietta (2012) explains that sacred values are those that "rely on a sense of self-evident truth" (p. 25). Instead, what's sacred is the content that the medium conveys.

For the majority of scholars working since the 1960s, this has meant the particular critical theory most closely associated with their work. Jeffrey J. Williams (2015) suggests that we have been in an "era of manifestoes" and that for most scholars "you were what your reading was— Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, queer" (p. B8). Certainly, this was part of my training. On my very first day of graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh, many of the first years gathered together to share why they had chosen to dedicate their lives to this field. One earnest young woman, in a matter-of-fact tone that suggested the obvious, said she'd chosen to pursue a PhD in English because she wanted to study politics. Indeed, many view their scholarship as a method of advocacy for various political positions—a point of view for which I have respect, and by which much good has been done. For most of the second half of the twentieth century, it was possible to shift our attention away from the book as a cultural artifact that had value as a means to creating expert readers and critical thinkers—an idea largely taken for granted—and consider how seeing and re-seeing literary texts might help to develop the thinking on any number of important social justice issues.

However, for those of us concerned with the fate of print books and the preservation of the literary mind, the digital age puts the sacred value of the book in direct conflict with myriad other sacred values. According to Marietta (2012), "Value conflict can be seen as the inevitable product of the condition that some values are incompatible with others" (p. 26). Unfortunately, embracing digital technologies that negatively impact the development of expert reading in favor of advocacy for various critical theories—especially those in which professors believe the Internet provides some benefit through alleged (but largely unexamined) ideas of democratization—engender just such value conflict in the world of education.

This is a surprising and difficult situation for many scholars. No one wants to knowingly impede the development of students' emotional and intellectual abilities. And so for individuals to take up a position that exists in direct opposition to books as important educational artifacts, an "intrapersonal" negotiation must take place. Isaiah Berlin, whom Marietta (2012) describes as providing "the philosophical basis for value pluralism" wrote that "Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual…so we must engage in what are called trade-offs—rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations" (p. 27). In the midst of the this conflict, books are held as a value, but one that can be put aside in a "trade-off" in favor of political advocacy.

## Question Five:  Poirot's Summation or Whodunnit?

At the end of each case, Agatha Christie puts her detective Hercule Poirot center-stage and provides an almost theatrical unpacking of the case. It plays perfectly into Poirot's well-known vanity and his sense of public justice to stand before all the principals, assembled together in one place—including the police, who are as ever woefully unprepared to do this complex

work. One by one, he takes us through the suspects and tests their potential culpability, at the same time demonstrating the train of thought that allowed him to discover the killer. In *13 at Dinner*, he looks to those assembled: "Come my friends," he says gently. "Let me tell you the real story of what happened that night" (Christie, 1933, p. 214). There is a great temptation to engage in the same exercise now, to list on my fingers all the potential suspects in the death of the literary mind: multinational technology companies that profit from brains reconfigured to the use of their products, national and state departments of education that try to place a digital band-aid on complex problems that can only be addressed through human agency, politicians who benefit from an electorate intellectually incapable of taking up their obligations as citizens in a democracy...I could go on, as the list is long. However, there is in the tone of these accusations something ugly, something in the recriminations that doesn't reflect my true feeling about the issue, which is largely pity. Because there are few among us who have not become caught up in the nearly continual use of Turing's "universal machines," few whose quality of thought, and so of life, has not been negatively impacted.

Instead, I'm drawn to consider the beauty and satisfactions of the literary mind, to think again on the long humanist project—the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Modernism—made possible through the slow and quiet contemplation of the book. The story of each reader's emotional and intellectual life is personal, according to Maryanne Wolf (2007), a "natural history" if you will of her reading life. As has been suggested before, most people who describe themselves as bibliophiles possess vivid memories of their experience of reading. Sven Birkerts (2007) calls it the "the primal scene," and then goes on to describe the spaces in which he reads—in bed, a favorite chair—armed with, for him, all the necessary accouterments: a cup of coffee, cigarettes, ashtray. Marcel Proust (2007) believed that reading was "at the threshold of the spiritual life" (p. 39) without which many people would be prevented "from descending…into the deep regions of the self where the true life of the mind begins" (p. 40). And Elizabeth Bowen (2007) writes that her most powerful memories "are only half true" (p. 59), that there is an interplay between reading and consciousness: "the process of reading is reciprocal" and the reader "flings into the story the whole of his sensual experience" (p. 63).

Because literature encompasses the potential of all life's possibilities, what's really at stake for the bibliophile is the place books hold in the creation of identity. Certainly, that has been my experience. I often tell the story of lying on my bed as an adolescent reading and ultimately rereading Agatha Christie's mysteries, and it's possible to mine those novels for clues to my personality. There are, as for Poirot, the competing desires for the snug comforts of an apartment filled with books, some music, the prospect of a good meal and the need for adventure, the opportunity for fame. There is the idea, so very much on display in Christie's characters, of the pleasure found in periods of solitude broken then, joyously, by friendship and conversation. Most of all, however, the idea driven home by Poirot, triumphant at the end of each case, that all we need to deliver justice to the world is an educated intelligence exercising its will on a problem. I could go on—indeed, already I'm thinking of three or four other places in which Agatha Christie's busy fingerprints can be found repeated, if you will, on the pages of my life. And she is only one author.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of my identity is the influence books have exerted on my ability for empathy. Isn't this central to what fiction and poetry do? They connect the reader's consciousness to that of the writer and his or her literary creations, whether the

protagonist of a novel or the speaker in a poem. I learn about what it means to live in poverty and yet not be crushed by it through Henry Miller (1961) in *Tropic of Cancer* when he writes, "I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive" (p. 1). I meet a sufferer in unrequited love in Edmund Rostand's (1954), *Cyrano de Bergerac*, when Cyrano thinks of his disappointments: "Yes, that has been the role I've always played: To prompt and be forgotten" (p. 205). And I learn the difficulty of living in the shadow of a difficult father as James Ramsey does in Virginia Woolf's (1927) *To the Lighthouse*: "He looked…like some old stone lying on the sand; he looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds—that loneliness which was for both of them the truth of things" (p. 203). But these deep, empathetic moments can only be called into being when a reader is immersed in the book, has fallen deep into the narrative dream, and takes a moment to pause—the weight of the book in hand—and think carefully, in a fertile quietude, that allows a connection to be made between the character and the reader.

Sophisticated conceptions of identity, empathy, consciousness—there is so much here worth preserving. And that only begins to describe the benefits of the literary mind. If we don't find ways to reconsider our relationship with technology, especially in educational spaces, we will produce a generation of thinkers for whom the foundation of what it has come to mean to be human will fundamentally change, a moment when they may look back and not see a headlong rush to progress—the language with which we describe so many of our technological developments—but the beginning of the end of the humanist project. There may be a moment when they look back and ask who was to blame. Of course by that time the answer will be obvious. Perhaps you've already worked it out? The killer responsible for the death of the literary mind will have been none other than you and me.

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