

and reviews in the fields of languages and literature increased from 13,000 annually in the 1960s to 72,000 in recent years. But as production rose, sales went south. In 2002, the Modern Language Association reported that some editors at university presses estimated that books of literary criticism might sell a maximum of 200 to 300 copies. At what point, asks Bauerlein, “does common sense step in?” When will the field accept that the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770–1850) may have been adequately explicated several decades ago, or that the enigmatic lyrics of Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) were unveiled quite thoroughly in 1965? In recent decades, foundations, humanities research centers, and other organizations have subsidized 225,749 new items of scholarship and criticism on American literature alone.

With so much scribbling, university tenure committees have raised the bar higher and higher

on the quantity of publications required for tenure. The percentage of humanities departments that say they value research above teaching increased from 35 percent in 1968 to 76 percent in 2005.

It’s time to curb publications in saturated areas, Bauerlein contends. He suggests that candidates for promotion be prohibited from submitting more than 100 pages for review. That would decrease the quantity of publications and increase the quality. Universities should re-emphasize teaching and student-oriented initiatives. “An essential part of higher education takes place in conversation, in face time with professors, in the give-and-take of one-on-one discussion,” Bauerlein writes. Colleges should forgo the fruitless tilling of overplowed ground that has for more than three decades distracted professors from teaching and done untold damage to undergraduates’ understanding of the humanities.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Art Recession

THE SOURCE: “The Culture Crash” by James Panero, in *City Journal*, special issue on New York’s Tomorrow, 2009.

THE REMARKABLY UNIFORM plunge in the endowments of New York City’s best known arts institutions during the 2008–09 recession raises troubling questions about the prudence of the city’s cultural leaders. If the investment goal of the financial managers of storied museums and companies is to preserve capital, why were so many of them long in risky investments in domestic and foreign stocks?

The reason, according to James Panero, managing editor of *The New Criterion*, is that a great many had memorized the same venture libretto. Many were even using the same “managers of [money] managers” who advised arts organizations to emphasize “total returns,” including growth of their endowments rather than hanging on to what they had.

EXCERPT

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

Let me paint today’s English-speaking world by the lights of the current Oxford Junior Dictionary (OJD). . . . It is a world without violets. Spring comes unannounced by catkins and proceeds without benefit of crocuses, cowslips, or tulips. Summer brings no lavender, melons, or nectarines, and autumn is absent of acorns, almonds,

and hazelnuts. Winter must be endured without the holly and the ivy, the wren or the mistletoe. . . .

On the other hand, in the OJD-world you’ll have no trouble locating blogs or chatrooms. Celebrities are there, spending euros. You can check your voicemail on your broadband MP3 player and send attachments with bullet points, all while bungee jumping if you so desire, without fear of blackberries below—not that kind, anyway.

—ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE, a lepidopterist and author, most recently, of *Sky Time in Gray’s River: Living for Keeps in a Forgotten Place* (2007), in *Orion* (July–Aug. 2009)

Many art museums got caught up in risky investments and, as a result, have had to sell off parts of their collections to pay the bills.

With the collapse of the city's investment banks and the deep recession overall, the result has been endowment declines of from 25 to 40 percent. Cutbacks, layoffs, and furloughs have ensued. And before the recession moves into the history books, he says, some institutions may well have to close their doors.

Commonly, arts institutions and foundations draw their endowment income based on a rolling average of income over several quarters. The last three devastating quarters are only now becoming a significant part of the average. "Eventually," a spokesman for the Metropolitan Museum told Panero, "the bad periods become the majority of the average. That's when the income will go precipitously down." For the Metropolitan, that year will be 2011.

Particularly vulnerable is the New York City Opera, which, like the Metropolitan, is an important national cultural institution. The opera was shut down almost entirely for the 2008–2009 season waiting for construction to end at its home theater. Ticket revenue fell from the \$13 million that it averaged for its 2005 to 2008 seasons to \$320,000. It lost

the temperamental director who had advised the shutdown before he assumed the job full time. Its endowment, once \$51 million, has sunk to \$10 million.

The National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts, a 184-year-old repository of American art, confronted its fiscal crisis by selling two major Hudson River school landscapes to pay its bills, acting only one step ahead of legislation by the New York legislature that would make such sales illegal. Even with the sale of the paintings the organization is left with an operating endowment of only \$10.5 million. Despite this, the academy's leaders say the crisis may have brought necessary changes that will make it stronger in the long run. Under the threat of bankruptcy, the institution changed its "antiquated board structure." The old system had hindered the fund raising and outreach that might have closed the gap before the academy lost its valuable paintings. The crisis has made the institution change its governing structure—permanently.

ARTS & LETTERS

Cheek Swabs for Hamlet

THE SOURCE: "Adaptation: On Literary Darwinism" by William Deresiewicz, in *The Nation*, May 20, 2009.

ARE HOMER, SHAKESPEARE, and Cervantes products of natural selection, like the opposable thumb and the Galápagos finches? A small but militant group of literary Darwinists is shaking up the field of

English literature with erudite books making such a case. But how, exactly, would storytelling have improved the fitness and increased the survival rate of *Homo sapiens* in the Pleistocene world?

William Deresiewicz, a former professor of English at Yale University and a contributing writer at *The Nation*, says that the rising group of literary Darwinists is seeking to dethrone the "abstrusities" of deconstructionism, social theory, and psychoanalysis that have reigned in English literature departments for the past few decades. The baleful prevalence of such theory, he says, has cut off the field from society, the main currents of academic thought, the average reader, and common sense.

Nascent literary Darwinism has endeavored to reseed the ground, trying to found a discipline of "new humanities." University of Missouri, St. Louis, professor Joseph Carroll opened the debate in 1995 with the publication of *Evolution and Literary Theory*, arguing that fiction evolved as a form of "cognitive regulation." With the great expansion of human intelligence thousands of years ago, storytelling emerged to bring "order to our newly complex inner world." Brian Boyd, the author of *On the Origin of Stories* (2009), describes fiction as evolutionarily helpful because it is the "way we train our minds for the vital business of social existence." Other Darwinists say that great writers help win the battle of natural selection because fiction extends the range of experience, empathy, emotions, and creativity.