

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.

Deresiewicz lauds the Darwinists for their practical conclusions but says that the need for their arguments only shows what a terrible pass the humanities have come to. Worse yet, he says, the Darwinists have a research program, and “few things in the academy are more powerful than that.” Some of them talk of putting readers in MRI machines to test their responses while studying, say, the *Iliad*. Or they suggest taking salivary swabs to provide “hormonal indicators of emotions experienced” during the reading of *Hamlet*. Deresiewicz writes that such schemes seem straight out of *Gulliver’s Travels*, in which one sage endeavored to extract sunbeams from cucumbers.

Evolutionary psychologists claim that “the human mind evolved in the Pleistocene, the 1.6 million years during which *Homo sapiens* emerged on the African savanna,” Deresiewicz writes. But the problem with this claim is that it is based entirely on analogy and deduction. Modern primates and hunter-gatherers act in certain ways, and their ancestors to the 50,000th generation might have acted exactly the same way. Or maybe not. Deresiewicz points out that nobody knows what the Pleistocene environment looked like, how our Pleistocene ancestors lived, or even if, perhaps, “our psychology may not be the product of the Pleistocene at all but of the 10,000 years since the emer-

gence of civilization.”

In other words, there is no proof that any of the evolutionary deductions are true. Even if they are, evolutionary psychology is a theory about what human beings have in common. What literary critics want to know goes beyond whether literature is a good thing. They seek to describe how great works differ from one another, and what makes them great. Worthwhile commentary on literature will always be personal, and it will never be definitive or universally valid. It will never satisfy demands for marketable skills, or produce a generation of technologists. It will merely help humans understand, Deresiewicz says, “who we are, where we came from, and where we’re going.”

OTHER NATIONS

Europe’s Envelope Economy

THE SOURCE: “The Hidden Economy in East-Central Europe: Lessons From a Ten-Nation Survey” by Colin C. Williams, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, July–Aug. 2009.

ASK A SPECIALIST ABOUT THE importance of the underground economy in Eastern and Central Europe during the Soviet period, and your terminology is likely to be corrected: Underground activity *was* the economy. A new study of 10 formerly Soviet-dominated states that have joined the European Union reveals that the EU is a long way from wiping

this form of commerce out.

One of every five workers in Eastern and Central Europe labors off the books or receives under-the-table supplemental payments, writes Colin C. Williams, a public policy professor at the University of Sheffield, in England. The prevalence of undeclared or underdeclared employment—off the books for tax, social security, or labor law purposes—ranges from 35 percent of randomly selected residents over the age of 15 in Romania to eight percent in Slovenia.

While shadow employment is

hardly unknown in any country, Eastern Europe has developed its own special version—“envelope” work. In a Eurobarometer survey, 10 percent of 5,084 workers with formal jobs reported receiving “envelope” payments amounting, on average, to 42 percent of their total wages. In Latvia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Poland, such payments amount to about half of the wages of people with formal jobs. In Romania, the figure is 70 percent, according to an extensive survey conducted in 2007. Envelope wages in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Estonia add up to only about a quarter of compensation and are used mostly to pay for overtime or extra work. Manual workers in these formerly communist states receive about 41 percent of their gross pay as envelope wages.