

Books About Things Never Read

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (August 2020)



Presumed Portrait of Jean Vauthier, Edouard Pignon, 1952

There comes a time in many men's lives—I was going to write 'in every man's life,' but nothing so universal can be said of men—when they begin to realise that they are cultural dinosaurs. They are out of sympathy with interests of the young, they do not even understand their jokes, and do not keep up with the latest artistic or literary developments because they do not believe that anything worthwhile can emerge in the current climate. The fact that all thinkers have deprecated the age in which they lived and seen it as a period of terminal decline hardly gives them pause. It might not have been true before, but this time, by unhappy conscience, it is true! The world, or at least what we value in the world, is finished.

That is very much what I felt on reading an article recently in *Le Monde*, the French newspaper supposedly of record (the very fact that I read a newspaper at all puts me in the cultural dinosaur class, for I know no young person who reads one). The article was about the latest ten-yearly survey by the French Ministry of Culture—Orwellian-sounding institution! —of the cultural practices of the French population.

No doubt one must take the replies to questions in surveys with a pinch of salt, but unthinking scepticism is no more reasonable than unthinking credulity. It is likely that people answered the questions more truly than they answer psephologist's questions about their voting intentions, when they often deny that they will vote for a candidate deemed disreputable or worse by all right-thinking persons. The questions are less emotionally charged because people, at least nowadays, are usually quite satisfied with their own cultural life and practices, indeed may be proud of them, and do not feel that they have to apologise to anyone for them.

What most depressed me about the report was the evidence it provided of the diminution of reading as an important part of the cultural, indeed mental, life of young people in France. It is all the more depressing because, according to my observations which admittedly are of a casual rather than of a scientific nature, I think France is less far down the road of cultural disintegration, not to say degradation, than Britain. If things are as bad as this in France, what must they be like in Britain, or for that matter in the United States?

First a couple of facts, assuming the report to have discovered facts, For personal reasons, I am most concerned with reading and books because they have played so large a part in my life, and in so far as I have had any ambition at all it is to have written by the end of my life something—if only a sentence or two—that someone might read with pleasure or instruction fifty years after my death. But if the results of Ministry of Culture's survey are anything to go by, in fifty years' time no one will be reading anything. Reading will have gone the way of goose-quill pens and antimacassars.

Up to 1973, assiduous reading was more frequent among the young than the old, but ever since then has been in decline among the young. In 1973, 28 per cent of the population bought between 10 and 15 books per year, more of the book-buyers young than old; in 2018 it was half as many, 14 per cent, and of them, all practically old. It seems that the habit of reading, at least of books, has almost disappeared.

Of course, people might say that the young do not read books in the sense of physical objects; instead, they read them on-line. But I think this is unlikely to be the case; when they are glued to their screens, it is not downloaded books that they are reading, and most of the time it is not even print that they are looking at.

The next line of defence against the depression that the decline in reading induces in me is that it doesn't really matter. In about 1850, Matthew Arnold wrote one of the great poems in English of the Nineteenth Century, in which he referred to the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' –like that of a wave receding from the shore–of religious faith, leaving mankind bereft of any but transient and personal satisfactions which it must take as best it could, leaving it to work out the purpose of life for itself. The loss of faith was to Arnold's epoch what the loss of reading is to ours.

Did the loss of faith matter? It happened more slowly than the decline in reading, religious faith attenuating unevenly and never quite universally, giving mankind time to accommodate to it. And it is possible to answer Arnold's question both in the affirmative and the negative.

Clearly, political alternatives to religion varied, in the following century and a half, from disastrous to catastrophic. Secularists turned out to be at least the equal of religious bigots or fanatics when it came to killing heretics, renegades and infidels. The comforts of religion were denied to millions. In the meantime: it turned out to be not so delightful for people to have to work out the purpose of life for themselves. Civilisation itself seemed to have collapsed into barbarity, at least in the west, when religion ceased to provide the framework of people's lives.

On the other hand, it cannot truly be said that, until the decline of religion, everything had been going swimmingly for mankind. Technical progress went *pari passu* with, if it was not actually caused by, the decline of religion; and while many people are inclined to decry technical improvement because it is not at all the same as moral improvement, I am rather less dismissive of it. Let him who is prepared to forego comfort decry the first innovation! Comfort is not everything, but it is not nothing either.

There are many things to lament in our modern world, no doubt some of them related to the loss of religious faith; but was there ever a time in history when there was *not* much to lament? Whether there is more to lament than ever before is a matter of judgment: it is not only a question of what there is to lament but of what there is to lament by comparison with what is or was expected and expectable. For example, before the invention of print, it would probably have been unthinkable, and certainly in vain, to lament the high rate of illiteracy. But nowadays to lament that a fairly high percentage of children in some western countries leave school being barely able to read, despite an education lasting eleven or twelve years and costing a vast amount, is perfectly reasonable—at least, on the assumption that a modern country should have a literacy rate of approaching 100 per cent.

What is striking in France, and would probably have been found elsewhere if the same type of surveys had been performed over the last half century, is the inverse relationship between the proportion of the population undergoing tertiary education and attachment to what the survey calls patrimonial culture, that is to say the cultural tradition as embodied in literature, theatre, classical music, attendance at museums and exhibitions, and so forth. By far the strongest attachment to it is exhibited by the generation in which tertiary education was still very much a minority experience. The higher percentage of a generation that had no tertiary education, the higher the percentage that was cultivated in this sense. In the oldest generation there were approximately four times as many cultivated persons as those who passed their *baccalauréat*@NERIconoclast<