

Senior Reading

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As soon as I encountered Francis Bacon's authoritative

proclamation (from the essay "Of Studies"), sometime in high school, I took it as my personal credo: "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man." But even before I read it, I had unknowingly adopted it. I have spent my life reading, conferring—mostly in classrooms—and writing. Reading came, as it does in most cases, first, as if by nature. The other two followed. Readers begin young, and are blissfully ignorant of why they have started on this obsession.

Reading has a history. Scholars and critics like Sven Birkerts and Alberto Manuel have detailed for us the changes in reading as a cultural practice, from the days when most people had to be read to, to the modern practice of silent, individual reading. But what I am interested in is my own reading practices and preferences, and how they have changed from my earliest days to the most recent.

How does a lifelong reader measure the course of his own history? Like any effort at self-analysis, tracking the changes involves a backward look and a recovery of facets of the person one used to be and still is, if only in part. Our tastes and habits alter as we age, as both body and mind undergo time's often not so subtle deprecations. "Progress" is not the right word; we adjust and adapt, for better or worse, and the reader we were at seven or seventeen is not the reader we are at sixty-seven. The eyes require help—more light, larger print—and the mind may have lost its own *Sitzfleisch*, the simple ability to sit still and concentrate. Even people with strong patience succumb, in the age of the tweet, to modest doses of attention deficit order. Focus, both physical and mental, may become difficult to maintain. We must work more strenuously at what once seemed easy or even effortless.

Of one's plans and aspirations, one begins to eliminate items from the lists one made in youth. Things formerly aspired to are

now erased as the unrealizable dreams of a different person. I won't learn Mandarin; I (probably) won't even get to China; I will never master the Argentine tango; I certainly won't swim the Channel. And I know that there are plenty of books I'm not going to read, things I have scratched off the "to-do" sheet. Schopenhauer, Kant's first and second *Critiques*, all of Pound's *Cantos*, Nabokov's *Ada*, Melville's *Pierre*, or the *Ambiguities*: They all elicit a pretty definitive "No, thank you."

Yeats said, "Bodily decrepitude is wisdom," but he was wrong, in part. The mind declines along with the body. When I was a college senior, I read all of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, albeit with more than an occasional glance at the Scott Moncrieff translation, for an independent study in Proust. Today, the English version alone presents what look like insurmountable challenges. Back in my salad days, right before the Proust course, I took a seminar on Henry James: one novel per week, including the daunting late masterpieces. Anyone who teaches college students will agree that you can't expect a twenty-year-old today to do *The Golden Bowl* in a week and come out understanding anything at all. Perhaps even I got only the skimpiest dose of comprehension, but at least I bullied my way through the novel. Today's students have more on their plates, and in their schedules, than I ever did. A half-century ago, high school and college were places and times for expansive leisureliness, openness, and wandering by the way. You can't read *Middlemarch* or *Moby-Dick* unless you have many unencumbered hours each evening to lose yourself in them.

Today I have the time, but rereading (for example) *The Wings of the Dove* would challenge me as much as it would an undergraduate with a surgically attached mobile phone. I have begun it and put it down five times in the past decade. The reason? The senior mind wanders. Although I shall continue to resist Twitter, the one thing I know about changes in my reading habits is that brevity has a lot to recommend it. Brevity of two kinds: shorter time spans, and shorter books.

Allow me to explain.

When I travel, especially on vacation, I always carry with me one *big* book, a loose and baggy monster, usually a novel that I can tuck into at night or on the plane, or in random moments of leisure, waiting for a companion or a bus. Something I can open and shut, and be pretty assured of finishing within the two or three weeks of my travels. If I have to keep at it for much longer, I risk forgetting the start of the book as I heave towards its end. I don't have the memory required to retain plot details and dialogue, not to mention echoes and repetitions and the kinds of things an English teacher dazzles his students with.

Not having a perfect memory, however, has many wonderful rewards. Namely, you can reread books you read years before with the delicious, double pleasure of coming upon some things as if for the first time ("What a beautiful sentence"; "I didn't think she would say *that*"; "I can't imagine what will happen next") and of experiencing others with the delight of recognition ("Ah, yes, I remember it well").

Rereading books from youth or even a later period has another advantage as well. You know you have guaranteed yourself a good return on your investment. With age, one is more aware of time slipping away as well as accumulating. What does one read? When a friend makes a recommendation, or a review piques your interest and you decide to make an outlay of time or even money, how long do you give yourself to be drawn in, captured, and lost in your indulgence? One chapter? Ten pages? A hundred? Three hours? Ever hopeful, you say to yourself, "This is a slowly developing tale. The author is setting her stage carefully, trying to engage our attention by focusing on those small details that will become larger as she discloses the secrets later on." How much later on?

Reading runs its own risks, and choosing a book is like sitting down at the gambling table. When might you strike it rich? On the next page? If you're smart, you may decide merely to cut your losses at a certain point and shut the book. It's boring. It's not for you. It did not engage you; it has inspired nothing other than irritation,

tedium, even sleep. It's now time to look elsewhere.

In youth I read promiscuously. I don't have that kind of energy today. With an old favorite like (here insert your own choice: Austen, Cather, Dickens, George Eliot, Forster, Twain) you know you won't go wrong. I reread *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma* every third year. Ditto *Mrs. Dalloway*, which by now I have practically memorized as if it were a lyric poem. I did re-read both *Middlemarch* and *Moby-Dick* within the past decade, but each one took up the better part of a year. I know that *David Copperfield*, which entranced me in seventh grade, will entrance me still. Montaigne: always.

As a habit, reading takes hold early and lasts as long as eyesight does. (Or even beyond: many former readers, now sight-impaired, rely on audio books, and some of them still use the verb "read" to describe what they do while listening.) Readers tend to be dreamy and escapist, imagining other worlds and other selves. Some are skimmers, some are divers. Some stick to the surface, darting from item to item; others like to submerge themselves, reading deeply as well as widely. They often want mastery, meaning that if one work of a writer entices them, they look forward to more of the same. These people tend to be intellectuals, or maybe just obsessives, insofar as they want to learn as much as possible about a subject or an author. The late Guy Davenport (who hated the word "erudite" but had as encyclopedic a mind and a reading history as one might imagine) was the kind of voracious lifetime reader, rare even in the mid-twentieth century, who is an endangered species today. In a recent appreciative essay, Mark Scroggins describes visits to his mentor in Lexington, Kentucky, the two friends facing each other in easy chairs, discussing what they'd been reading. "The canonical went without saying—he knew his Shakespeare, his Dickens, his Shelley and Coleridge. He had worked his way through all thirty-nine volumes of Ruskin's works, and had spent a summer with Sir Walter Scott's twenty-seven Waverley novels. One time he lamented that he might not get around to reading all of Bulwer-Lytton." I dare anyone to find more than a handful of people, even literary academics, most

of whom are now buried in the minutiae of their subspecialties, of whom you might say, “the canonical went without saying.”

Guy Davenport neither drove nor owned a television. Like Larry McMurtry, reputed to know the whereabouts of everything in his sprawling store in Archer City, Texas, he was first and foremost a bookman. Stanley Edgar Hyman and his wife Shirley Jackson inhabited a ramshackle frame house in Bennington, every nook overflowing with books, every room stocked floor-to-ceiling. Both the critic and the novelist could say where anything was: “the bookcase at the top of the stairs, second shelf from the bottom, on the left-hand side,” or words to that effect, according to generations of admiring colleagues and students. A life devoted to and defined by literature, by reading as an all-consuming passion, is harder to imagine in the twenty-first century. C.K. Stead, New Zealand’s preeminent man of letters, entitled a 2008 selection of essays and reviews *Book Self: The Reader as Writer and the Writer as Critic*. Stead is himself a poet, a novelist, an essayist. In other words, not only a man of the book but also a man who considers his “self” to be a book, or to be made of books. Think of other encyclopedic readers: the late Northrop Frye, who could “anatomize” literature as well as criticism because of his wide-ranging expertise; or Stanford professor Franco Moretti, a skimmer rather than a diver, who prefers “distance” reading to close reading in order to take very long views of his specimens; or the anomalous Harold Bloom, whose own prodigious memory makes him a one-man Google. Giants of reading are seldom snobs: rather, they tend to take in everything, traveling in the realms of brass and tin as well those of gold. “Book men” and women: rare birds.

We ordinary or “common”—the term beloved of Dr. Johnson—readers, even academics like me, often lack the stamina or retentive powers to emulate the geniuses of total recall, but we, too, wander at will among literary types, genres, and quality. Virginia Woolf had it only partly right in her 1916 essay “Hours in a Library” with the summary distinction: “Let us begin by clearing up the old confusion between the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading,

and point out that there is no connection whatever between the two.” Many of us love both, although I know what she means.

From the sublime to the mundane, the ennobling to the trashy, a genuine reader will pick up anything in sight, often regardless of style or substance, rather than do something else. Reading inspires, amuses, and instills more than wisdom or even information. In the age of instant reference, when facts (that may turn out to be factoids or falsehoods) are always available with a flick or click of the finger and a trip to Google, we have less need to perform heroic mnemonic acts. Children who catch the reading bug early know all too well the particular combination of pleasure and power that arises from feelings of mastering first one’s letters, then the words, sentences, and finally the meanings that come from the printed page. That combination, rather than information-seeking, keeps them going into adulthood.

To the question of what one reads, and how reading habits change with age, comes a complementary one: what does one think about, and do with, books themselves? Most of us remember beloved books, even the dog-eared copies that were the literary equivalent of the favorite panda, rabbit, teddy bear, or blanket that we carried around until it finally deteriorated after one too many insults or washings. And as we got more serious, we began accumulating, at first unconsciously and then with greater deliberation, our own collections. For people who think of libraries as safe havens, islands of calm in a sea of storms, the easiest way to propitiate the gods of chaos is to build real shelves, which act as metaphorical protective bulwarks, capable of withstanding the assaults of surly siblings, unsympathetic or uninterested parents, and then of other bullies and unpleasant data from the external world. The bedroom or the library or (see the case of Hyman and Jackson) the entire house becomes a literary fortress.

What happens when you have to dismantle the fortress? What happens when you have to move? Everyone over a certain age has had some version of the dreaded experience. You have built graduate

student bookshelves from boards and cinderblocks or purchased cheap bookcases from Ikea. You have filled some rooms with books left over from college courses, which you have never opened again, and other books bought for pleasure, which you have reread and annotated. You now find that it's time to move. You put everything in boxes; you carry the boxes—if you are poor or unlucky—down and then up stairs; you replace them on shelves in your new digs.

How many times can you do this? At least wedding gifts you have never opened can rest comfortably in attic, garage, or basement, and await the moving men when you have to relocate. They are not taking up interior domestic space that might be filled to better purpose.

At the age of forty, I sold a house and put all my worldly goods in storage for a year while I was scheduled to be out of town. I knew that on my return I would be buying, and moving into, a smaller residence. This was my chance to de-accession. How to proceed? I began removing the books from the shelves, individually and lovingly; a gentle patina of dust covered all of them, but each one brought back memories. How can you sell your children? Abstruse philosophy turns out to have a practical value, because it was Hegel who helped me break the ice. I opened my paperback copy of his *Phenomenology*, unregarded for twenty years. The print was small; the pages had yellowed; the spine had lost its glue. I realized I would never read or need this book again and that if by some bizarre chance I had to reread Hegel I could always find a better copy in my university library (you know: the place where you can borrow books, for free). So into a cardboard box it went. Then the floodgates opened. More and more volumes followed Hegel into the bins slated for re-sale. And I never missed a single one.

Several years ago I was talking to the poet Mark Strand about a move he had just made from Chicago to New York. He had taken a position at Columbia and was living in a Manhattan apartment much smaller than his previous one. I asked how he had pared down belongings, especially books. “Willard,” the wise sage replied, “You

really don't need more than a hundred books." A young person, especially a serious reader with a bibliophile's collecting instincts, will probably not recognize the truth of that remark. But now in the digital age, all that recommends the book as material object, unless one is a scholar with very specific and arcane needs, is its aesthetic appeal, its manifestation of cultural capital or, with its marginalia, its reminder of readings past and the reader you once were. In London and elsewhere there used to be and probably still are antique shops that sold books by the meter or yard, often merely fake cardboard boxes with real leather spines turned out, to give the appearance of a gentleman's library. Books used to furnish rooms. Now, the entertainment center has preempted the space for access to the greater world, for knowledge as well as for pleasure.

If you are what you read as well as what you eat, you can

usually take the measure of a person by a quick look at what's on his nightstand. Not the coffee table with its picture books, its ornamental art and travel pornography, and not even the bookshelves, which store things that no one has touched in years. Like the medicine chest and the refrigerator, the nightstand bears witness to daily habits or, more precisely, nocturnal ones. You creep into bed and either stimulate or relax yourself as you escape from more mundane activities into an inner journey that may keep you up and then knock you out.

Here's my latest inventory: Sarah Ruden's impressive, lively verse translation of the *Aeneid*; Jonathan Galassi's new bilingual version of the *Canti* of Leopardi; James Wood's *How Fiction Works*; the correspondence of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell; art criticism by Jed Perl and music criticism by Alex Ross; Helen Vendler on the poems of Emily Dickinson. All of them have sat piled up there for more than year. I move more slowly at night than by day, dipping in at random.

The observant reader will have noticed several things about this list. For one thing, it lacks long, indeed any, works of fiction. For an-

other, the books are not best-sellers and they are not from this year. Most important, they are all things that can be read, even scanned, and followed non-sequentially. Virgil tells a story, of course, but I have read the *Aeneid* so many times, and in so many versions, that I can open the epic to any page—like those medieval readers who were throwing the *sortes vergilianae*, seeking answers from the man generally regarded as a magus whose wisdom can help with life's questions—and pick up the story and its hero for as long as I wish. And the Bishop-Lowell correspondence makes for a kind of dual biography, best read from front to back, but for someone like me who knows something about the poets and their work, it's perfectly legitimate to open and read anywhere. The poets' letters answer one another, but each one has a life of its own. "Tolle, lege": the words of Saint Augustine come to mind. "Lift. Read." The simplest formula possible.

Aside from my road or air trips, I have put aside long works of fiction in favor of shorter things or work, like the books above, that can be dipped into. The big book still beckons but I must resist its siren call unless I find optimal conditions. Wallace Stevens once said that a long poem "comes to possess the reader and . . . naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there." True enough, and equally true for long works of fiction. Time remains the necessary ally as well as the enemy. You need a lot of it. Virginia Woolf once advised would-be readers to avoid entirely Spenser's *Faerie Queene*: "Put it off as long as possible." Then follows a list of mundane activities to pursue instead, "and then, when the whole being is red and brittle as sandstone in the sun, make a dash for *The Faerie Queene* and give yourself up to it." As with many long books, the best time and place for reading is often when one is laid up in bed with an illness that incapacitates mildly but doesn't impair one's faculties.

We seldom have that kind of time. Brevity becomes the soul of wisdom and passion, as well as wit. My preferences have switched to shorter things. No longer Joyce and James—except for the former's

Dubliners and the latter's novellas—and Proust, but Willa Cather and Peter Taylor among twentieth-century novelists. Among contemporary fiction writers, the short story masters William Trevor and Alice Munro and, several decades younger still, Jhumpa Lahiri always get my attention.

More important than genre or length are tone and style. Clarity trumps difficulty, because I also understand—as my younger self did not—that complexity and depth are not synonymous, nor are apparent simplicity and superficiality. In other words, style makes its own claims on a reader like me. I always tell my students that the best definition of “good writing” is that which makes you interested in something you are not interested in. The quality of language and of syntax points to the quality of the author's mind. I read things in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books* because the writing is so damn good.

The beauty of the sentence draws me in, and my two favorite living writers of fiction—writers of entirely different sorts—are the octogenarians Shirley Hazzard and James Salter, both of whom insinuate their beauties into a reader's mind and memory. Start with *The Transit of Venus* and *The Great Fire*, her wondrous novels, and *Burning the Days*, his memoir unfolding a genuinely feline heterosexuality, to see what a master can do with single sentences.

Here is the opening paragraph of *The Great Fire*, which both stopped me in my tracks and impelled to keep reading:

Now they were starting. Finality ran through the train, an exhalation. There were thuds, hoots, whistles, and the shrieks of late arrivals. From a megaphone, announcements were incomprehensible in American and Japanese. Before the train had moved at all, the platform faces receded into the expression of those who remain.

What was the appeal? First of all, the verbs, none of which is transitive, and many of which are passive, or mere verbs of being. This is the kind of writing Strunk and White and other master teachers

always caution against. Hazzard is priming us for action, holding back and moving forward simultaneously. Second, instead of “English,” the unexpected “American,” to remind us of the war just ended and the political-military stakes. (The novel begins in Japan; the year is 1947.) Last, and most startling, the single present tense verb at the paragraph’s end: “those who remain” have been transformed into an abstract, allegorical group, no longer just the people on this particular platform but any group being left behind. Hazzard has given us a specific time and place; she has also opened us up to another world of almost mythic dimensions.

Because I am, by instinct and profession, a reader and critic of poetry, I am always looking for new poets or reviewing the work of the masters who inspired me when young. Everyone’s tastes change—in literature, music, art, and food—with age. Some preferences remain while others fade. Those perennial favorites of adolescents—Dylan Thomas and e. e. cummings—no longer exert their claims on me, although anyone who wants to introduce junior high school students to the charms and intricacies of poetic practice could not go wrong with virtually any cummings poem. I never much appreciated Whitman when I was held thrall to the opacities of modernism. Now I understand how and why he is—bloviation and repetition aside—the great American genius, capable of tenderness, sadness, and delicacy as well as bravado and self-promotion.

A great twentieth-century intellectual once confessed: “I read poetry because it saves time.” That was Marilyn Monroe. She got it right. We say that poetry makes its mark and engages its readers in two opposing ways: through condensation and suggestiveness. It packs its meanings, beauties, and effects into the fewest number of words, but it also allows each reader to respond to, and therefore to interpret the evidence individually. A phrase, a figure of speech, a syntactic arrangement, a sonic or musical gesture will affect each reader differently. The activity of reading a poem may take less time than the reading of prose, but with a poem, as with a picture or a relatively short piece of music, you have the advantage of repetition

and expansiveness: the eye and ear can take in the same data more than once. The work seeps into the reader's soul. Even, or especially, in age, poetry retains the power to engage me, even long poems. Dr. Johnson wryly said of *Paradise Lost* that no one ever wished it longer. I can pick it up—as I can the *Aeneid*—and open it at random, begin reading, and stop whenever I wish. It overwhelms and absorbs one's finest energies.

I guess I have been lucky as a reader for many reasons. First of all, I still read. It is the activity to which I am most addicted. Not doing it for even a short time provokes feelings of withdrawal. And next, now that I am reading fewer, and shorter novels, and reading fiction of any sort less frequently than I do non-fictional prose and poetry, I have the good fortune to have matched my tastes to my capacities.

The brevity of poetry is only part of its appeal. If brevity alone were what I sought, I would fit right into the twenty-first century, but of course I do not. I have never written, and only twice read, a tweet. I have never looked at, let alone appeared on, Facebook. I seldom read anyone's blog. Why should I? I have books. I asked a group of high school student last spring how much time they spent doing "free" reading, i.e., reading things unassigned in class. They all raised their hands. Queried further, they also admitted that the bulk of their reading was stuff written by their friends: text messages, tweets, and blogs. Whether this ought to be cause for celebration or regret remains to be learned.

"By their books ye shall know them": a motto to be taken seriously. Last July, on a three-and-a-half hour plane trip, I walked through what the pilot always helpfully refers to as the "aircraft" twice: once, forty minutes after take off, and once forty minutes before landing. I wanted to see how many passengers were reading. One hundred and forty-four people filled the main cabin. Fifteen were reading books, or something on their Kindles. An equal number were reading magazines, and not of the *New Haven Review* or *New York Review of Books* sort. Others were playing video games

or looking at movies on their personal computers, watching the in-flight entertainment, or just sleeping. The percentages seemed to be about right, what I probably would have guessed.

I was certainly the only person on board who was reading Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Perhaps I was the only person ever to read it on an American Airlines flight. Sitting there, I contemplated Wordsworth's memoir of his first year at university. From his college rooms, the young Wordsworth, a mediocre student at Cambridge, saw at Trinity College the statue of Newton "with his prism and his silent face, / The marble index of a mind for ever / Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone." Flying through the air, I was, like all readers, also moving through my own seas of thought, alone among strangers, and grateful for the solitude.