



## EYE EXERCISE / KLENSE

# E Y E

## EXERCISE

### B E N J A M I N

### K L E N S E

OVER 60 DIVERSE

THINKERS ON HOW TO

GET MORE FROM BOOKS

ADLER BACON BAIN BAYARD BENJAMIN

BLOOM CALVINO CARLYLE CARROLL ECO

EMERSON FANON FELSKI FISH FRYE GADAMER

GALLOP GIBBON HARE HELPS HESSE HOOKS

LOCKE MONTAIGNE MORELY NABOKOV NIETZSCHE

PARKS RICOUER RORTY ROSE ROSENBLATT

RUNDELL RUSKIN SCHOPENHAUER SEDGEWICK SELF

SONTAG THOREAU WILDE WOLLSTONECRAFT WOOLF XI

# Eye Exercise

Over 60 diverse thinkers on how to get more from  
books

Author: Benjamin Klense

Publisher: Lulu

Copyright: Creative Commons (NonCommercial, NoDerivatives)

Copyright Holder: Benjamin Klense ©(2025)

ISBN: 978-1-326-01308-0

Published: November, 2025

URL: <https://eyeexercise.org/>

# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>                        | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Profiles</b>                            | <b>62</b> |
| Abrams, Meyer Howard (1912-2015) . . . . . | 63        |
| Adler, Mortimer J. (1902-2001) . . . . .   | 68        |
| Bacon, Francis (1561-1626) . . . . .       | 74        |
| Bain, Alexander (1818-1903) . . . . .      | 79        |
| Bayard, Pierre (1954-) . . . . .           | 84        |
| Benjamin, Walter (1892-1940) . . . . .     | 90        |
| Bloom, Harold (1930-2019) . . . . .        | 95        |
| Calvino, Italo (1923-1985) . . . . .       | 99        |
| Carlyle, Thomas (1795-1881) . . . . .      | 103       |
| Carroll, Lewis (1832-1898) . . . . .       | 106       |
| Collingwood, R. G. (1889-1943) . . . . .   | 110       |
| Davies, Robertson (1913-1995) . . . . .    | 115       |
| D’Israeli, Issac (1766-1848) . . . . .     | 119       |
| Eco, Umberto (1932-2016) . . . . .         | 122       |
| Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1803-1882) . . . . . | 126       |
| Fanon, Frantz (1925-1961) . . . . .        | 130       |
| Felski, Rita (1956-) . . . . .             | 136       |
| Fish, Stanley (1938-) . . . . .            | 142       |
| Frye, Northrop (1912-1991) . . . . .       | 144       |
| Fuller, Margaret (1810-1850) . . . . .     | 149       |
| Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1900-2002) . . . . .  | 154       |
| Gallop, Jane (1952-) . . . . .             | 160       |
| Gibbon, Edward (1737-1794) . . . . .       | 163       |
| Hare, Julius Charles (1795-1855) . . . . . | 166       |
| Harrison, Frederic (1831-1923) . . . . .   | 168       |
| Helps, Arthur (1813-75) . . . . .          | 172       |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Hesse, Herman (1877-1962) . . . . .          | 175 |
| hooks, bell (1952-2021) . . . . .            | 178 |
| Jackson, Holbrook (1874-1948) . . . . .      | 183 |
| Johnson, Samuel (1709-1784) . . . . .        | 189 |
| Jonson, Ben (1572-1637) . . . . .            | 193 |
| Locke, John (1632-1704) . . . . .            | 196 |
| Lowell, James Russell (1819-1891) . . . . .  | 200 |
| Mendelsund, Peter (1968-) . . . . .          | 204 |
| Miller, Henry (1891-1980) . . . . .          | 211 |
| Miller, J. Hillis (1928-2021) . . . . .      | 216 |
| Montaigne, Michel de (1533-1592) . . . . .   | 220 |
| Morley, John (1838-1923) . . . . .           | 225 |
| Morrison, Toni (1931-2019) . . . . .         | 228 |
| Nabokov, Vladimir (1899-1977) . . . . .      | 233 |
| Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938-2025) . . . . .      | 236 |
| Parks, Tim (1954-) . . . . .                 | 245 |
| Ricoeur, Paul (1913-2005) . . . . .          | 252 |
| Robinson, Francis P. (1906–1983) . . . . .   | 258 |
| Rorty, Richard (1931-2007) . . . . .         | 263 |
| Rose, Jonathan (1953-) . . . . .             | 269 |
| Rosenblatt, Louise (1904-2005) . . . . .     | 274 |
| Rundell, Katherine (1987-) . . . . .         | 279 |
| Ruskin, John (1819-1900) . . . . .           | 282 |
| Schopenhauer, Arthur (1788-1860) . . . . .   | 285 |
| Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1950-2009) . . . . . | 288 |
| Self, Will (1961-) . . . . .                 | 291 |
| Sontag, Susan (1933-2004) . . . . .          | 294 |
| Thoreau, Henry David (1817-1862) . . . . .   | 297 |
| Ulin, David (1961-) . . . . .                | 301 |
| Wilde, Oscar (1854-1900) . . . . .           | 304 |
| Wolf, Maryanne (1947-) . . . . .             | 308 |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Wollstonecraft, Mary (1759-1797) . . . . . | 313        |
| Woolf, Virginia (1882-1941) . . . . .      | 316        |
| Xi, Zhu (1130–1200) . . . . .              | 320        |
| <b>References</b>                          | <b>326</b> |

# Introduction

Lem's Law:  
No one reads;  
if someone does read, he doesn't understand;  
if he understands, he immediately forgets

---

*Stanislaw Lem*

If we pair Lem's Law with Bayard's observation that we forget much of what we read, misremember what we recall, and tend to be unchanged when we put down a book, we can only conclude that we're poor readers (Stanislaw 1986, 2; Bayard 2007). Ideally, we read in circles: our prior knowledge and experience condition how we interpret a text; this interpretation broadens our understanding; this understanding contributes to our interpretation of subsequent texts and situations. This knowledge and experience constitute a schema, and as our schema grows, we grow. We are aware of how books should work, can work, yet typically experience them instrumentally, cheaply, and transiently.

If you're taking the time to read, why not read a title worthy of your time in such a way that it can leave an indelible trace? Even if you're reading for relaxation, with no presumption of permanence, richer titles read with attention make for more compelling escapism. Books make better companions, distractions, and teachers when they challenge and engage us.

Reading is a skill, and skills are developed not merely through repetition but focused, deliberate practice. We don't become better readers if we don't know what that entails, if we don't learn from experts like the people profiled in this volume, and

if we don't practice. There is no correct way of reading, but we will argue that some are ineffective.

Our schemas are how we see ourselves, our books, and our world. They are mental representations of concepts and their connections. By understanding the *hermeneutic circle* in which we interpret, in which our schemas are employed and updated, we become better rounded; our world's circumference broadens, becoming more inclusive yet easier to navigate.

If we forget much of what we read, we must be intentional about the books we choose. They should be relevant to our purpose in reading, worthy of our attention, and challenge us enough that we hone our skills. We can begin, then, with the question: what criteria should we use in selecting books which can truly affect us?

The two lists, bestsellers and "great books", suggest preliminary answers. The one promotes the modern, fresh, contemporary, and popular; the other, the classic, time-honoured, revered, and foundational. They exemplify principles for literary selection.

The bestsellers are ostensibly those currently commercially successful in a particular market. The market has spoken, but all it has said is that publishers persuaded enough people to purchase certain titles. These sales don't reflect considered or critical judgement, merely hype.

Perhaps a bestseller is at least representative of the zeitgeist—our collective cultural schema, what our peers are reading and talking about? Somewhat, but reading often lags purchase, and there are many reasons to buy a book that you don't in-

tend to read immediately. Eco's "antilibrary" of unread books, for example, reflected his belief that books are more valuable when they're unread, embodying the spirit of *tsundoku*, the Japanese neologism for the practice of acquiring books and letting them stack up without reading them (Taleb 2007, 1–2; Shockey 2020, 100).

hooks suggests that a current, popular book can be worth reading for the discussion it generates: it's the "storytelling that creates community" (McLeod 1998). The sentiment is valuable, but has only limited relevance to literary selection and, as Bayard explained, such discussions often use a book as a mere prompt, not requiring you to have actually read it (Bayard 2007, 145, 150, 162). When people appear to talk about new books, they're often talking about reviews and commentary of them, especially for non-fiction.

Popularity may not be a proxy for greatness, but it does imply a degree of readability assumed absent in the classic—it promises that the text is approachable. The image of the unreadable classic is often outdated, however, with contemporary translations making ancient texts more readable than their reputation implies. But even if a book is easy to read, this counts for little if it has nothing to say. Perhaps a book is difficult because it has something important to impart? Bestsellers may, of course, be both deep and readable, but this is difficult to determine at the height of their popularity.

Calvino suggests that our present time is "always the context in which we have to place ourselves to look either backwards or forwards", so we should "skilfully [alternate] classic readings with calibrated doses of contemporary material" (Calvino 1999, 8). Yet the resounding consensus amongst our thinkers



is against the contemporary altogether. This can have the ring of dusty conservatism where antiquity is an argument in itself, clashing with our liberal culture. The bestseller may be shallow, but at least suggests the possibility of a modern, fresh perspective.

The compromise is to use posterity as a criterion for literary selection. A book need not be ancient to be worthwhile, but should have been tested by time. Emerson suggested waiting at least a year after publication; Sontag, 25-30 years after the author stops working (Emerson 1912, 196; Sontag 1995, 240). This feels more progressive, at least, and allows for older titles to be reevaluated.

In the present, a book's notoriety and fame become hopelessly intertwined (Emerson 1912, 196). Posterity picks them apart by evaluating from a later context, when one is no longer enmeshed in the conditions that gave rise to the book: knowing what came after it, a more sober judgement can be reached. The delay it introduces between publication and reading does not diminish a worthwhile book: texts "speak across centuries" when their "very untimeliness renders them newly timely" (Felski 2008, 119). Posterity argues against the newest releases on the basis that so many books have withstood generations of criticism, it's reckless to spend scant reading time on the recent. Posterity is a suspension of judgement.

Fiction's power doesn't depend on being up-to-date, but perhaps non-fiction's does? Bestselling non-fiction appeals to the general public by making provocative original claims, but these claims, by their nature, haven't been evaluated by experts. So, to the extent that some grand, new idea is exciting, it's also probably wrong in equally interesting ways. There

is a contradiction in wanting to know the latest information and the truth. Without posterity as a yardstick, the reader must rely on their background knowledge and expertise to judge—knowledge that they may not even realise they lack.

Posterity combines with influence to create the classic, such as the first modern novel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. It earned a positive critical consensus over generations, and made a meaningful impact on culture. The novel tells of a Spanish gentleman who reads chivalric fiction obsessively to the point that he believes he is a knight errant, and journeys around Spain behaving as one. Cervantes was inspired by the chivalric fiction he satirised. Flaubert cited this novel as an inspiration of his classic, *Madame Bovary*, whose titular character, Emma Bovary, bears similarities to *Quixote* in her misuse of fiction. A work's influences, however, are never singular or linear. Both authors were also influenced by the societies that they lived in, and their lifetime of reading. Further, Frye saw a universality underlying literature: readers and writers think and work within an intertextual web (Frye 2006a, 417; Frye 2009, 407). Archetypes are mutated and transmitted, linking texts across time—through influences all books are connected.

The concept of influence encompasses explicit references to older texts, allusions to iconic figures and scenarios, and implicit employment of an earlier author's concepts. *Don Quixote* directly references Plato's *Republic*, alludes to the Homeric epics, and incorporates the spirit of Romantic and chivalric fiction by integrating the register of chivalry and the impromptu recital of sonnets by various characters. To read with knowledge of this intertextuality is to notice connections, and therefore enrich your experience of reading both

the source texts and their influences. The more familiarity we have with influential works, the more they have been assimilated into our schemata, the easier we may traverse these links between books: we see more when we read. If we're not aware of an allusion because we're not familiar with its source, then we're likely to read literally and therefore shallowly.

This helps explain why influential books are so valued, but should influence operate as a proxy for literary selection? Bayard reassures us that we aren't compelled to read books purely on account of their influence, because their archetypes, concepts, and aesthetics, escape the text into our culture (Bayard 2007, 10–12). He conceived of our cultural literacy as an ad hoc, disorganised, misremembered network of book titles, key plot points, conceptions of famous authors, and knots of associations between these nodes. The intertextual web and network of such trivia that we each possess is our cultural schema. We share a culture to the extent that our cultural schemata overlap. Flaubert's was partly constituted by Cervantes'; Flaubert's readers are partly constituted by both. We can't help but read and write these influences because together they constitute how we understand the world.

A book, therefore, need not be read by those it influences. Emma Bovary read romance novels in such a way that *bovarism* has entered English dictionaries to denote a person's domination by a romantic or unreal conception of themselves. *Quixotic* was derived from Cervantes' novel to mean impracticality in pursuit of ideals, a failure to distinguish reality from imagination. The Bible has immensely influenced people who haven't fully read it; and the influence of Marx,

Freud, Nietzsche far outstripped their readership.

The Bible, *Don Quixote*, and other “great books” are almost antipodal to the bestsellers. They constitute the Western Canon, the supreme classics, but ultimately, like the bestsellers, this is simply a list. Whereas the bestseller list grants the market the right to curate and rank its titles, this list is formed on more subjective grounds. The Western Canon implicitly makes the descriptive claim that its titles were the most influential and highly regarded, and the normative claim that these books are the absolute best, demanding to be read to the exclusion of others. It purports to solve our problem of what titles are worthy of our time.

Its descriptive claim suggests an exercise in literary history—a mapping of the recursive web of influence—and implies a procedure to rank the titles. Yet the typically implicit nature of allusions, uncredited sources, and the sheer amount of texts to consider make this at best a long-term project for a colossal committee. Indeed, the two principal attempts at enumerating the Western Canon relied on the books well-known to the few men who compiled them plus an ad hoc methodology. The first version of Adler’s Great Books of the Western World exemplified a few dead white males. Bloom’s attempt included more diversity, but was the product of a few hours’ work, and he subsequently disowned it (Pearson 2008). The compilers selected titles already integrated into their cultural schemas.

We breathe an air of influences unbounded by hemispheres, yet *The Canon* is synonymous with the West. Its most influential book was written across the Middle East, Babylon, and Egypt, and its impact surely depended on this cross-cultural

genesis. Are we not past the era of privileging the West as if the maps of our culture delimited the Prime Meridian with *hic sunt dracones*? Are we claiming that the foundational texts of the Middle East, China, and India have no merit while a lesser known Greek tragedy does?

There is some core to these lists generally agreed upon: Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, and Sophocles, for example. In fact they're so dominated by the ancients that we may wonder why anyone has bothered to write since. Are these titles really the apotheosis of literature? This brings us to the normative claim: *because* these books are so old and influential, they're the best there is. Critics of the Western Canon take the position that not only is it self-perpetuating—influential because each generation is taught it—reflecting historico-socio-economic prejudices, but that elevating a handful of predominantly white men from a single continent, writing centuries ago, as the ideal, is preposterous.

This is true. Yet, while the critics' normative claim is reasonable, their descriptive claim is not: we can stipulate that a highly celebrated masterpiece today was once tragically overlooked and yet wasn't influential in any way. Its lack of influence by no means reflects its merit. And here lies the crux: the defenders of the Western Canon, however misguided their selection criteria, are surely correct that some of the most influential and highly regarded works of literature in the past were the product of a homogeneous handful of white men, and their opponents are surely correct that if we approach the question of what the best books are now, we end up with a very different list. One list cannot fulfil both functions.

These debates over the Canon trace back to a crucial misconception. When we have talked of lists of books, implied a scale of value, and applied epithets such as “classic”, we have erred as most early critics did in behaving like fish who do not know what water is. Deeply entrenched in a schema of norms and values, we don’t realise their contingency, and that they could be different. Fish, no relation, uses the phrase *interpretative community* to describe a similar concept, which we will adapt to mean a group of people with shared norms and values for interpreting texts—a common schema for this purpose (Fish 1980, 171). The fish were in an implicit interpretative community, ignorant of others.

Bestsellers, great books, and classics are always relative to such a community. A canon is only useful when conceived in this relative fashion, as a product of an interpretative community, with a restricted scope, and recognised as its creators’ judgement. Indeed, the values of an interpretative community expressed in its canonical texts provide a starting point for literary selection. The best we can do is deprioritise *the* Canon in favour of each interpretative community maintaining their own canon. After all, as Self argues, the Canon’s critics aren’t against the principle, just its contents: they want to recreate it in their image (Self 2022, 269).

The defenders of the Canon earnestly insist on the primacy of their list because it’s how they’ve been enculturated. It’s embedded, directly or by reference, in their schemata, but not just by the web of influences we’ve described. Reading a book involves inferring norms of interpretation; and norms imply values. Being schooled in a particular interpretative community, associating with people with this common background, find-

ing norms reinforced by subsequent texts you read and conversations you have, make these norms and values feel like *the* norms and *the* values.

What about *our* values? Why do we need either list when we have noses? Johnson advocated pleasure as the principle by which we should take up and, when it diminishes, put down, books: to follow our instincts (Johnson 1825a, 370). Certainly, our mental relationships between concepts are partly weighted by frequency of use and emotional valence, yet this valence need not be positive. A book can affect us because it saddens us, for example. We're affected when the text elicits aspects of our self schema—our beliefs, experiences, and interests. Our greatest interest is ourselves. Our self schema is our most dominant schema, our most dense, so a relationship of this kind is memorable and integrated into our self-conception. Quixote's knight-errant schema became so profoundly connected with his self-schema that his conception of himself radically shifted. So, books don't have to be pleasurable to be meaningful and memorable to us, only inspire a strong emotional response.

If we substitute pleasure for emotionality, then, for the latter to function as a proxy for literary selection, we must be able to anticipate a book's affect on us. This is a judgement about how the book will interact with our self-schema that we reach before reading. The signals available to us are, unfortunately, readily exploited by marketers, media, and our tendency to track trends. The original, controversial, well-marketed title seems to convey greater potential for emotional heft than one lower down in the pile due to the volume of the discourse it generates. Without a great deal of experience in literary

selection, our taste is poor. Our noses lead us to the newly ripe rather than the finely aged. This is hard to hear because we identify with our tastes, we are partly constituted by our values—we definitely know what interests us! But the underdeveloped schema of the immature reader manifests as *pica*: they eat dirt like their neighbour and enthuse about it. The popular and the recent are so much more accessible that posterity's urging is often ignored. We don't know what we're missing, so we miss out.

This affective projection is a background hum for the immature reader, which transforms into a melody as their taste refines, as their palate becomes more nuanced, but prior to this point we must read somewhat on faith, guided by posterity. Typically, this entails selecting classic titles that appeal to our tastes and interests—aspects of our self-schema that are more apparent to us. Our immature tastes combined with the judgement of posterity render literary selection feasible initially; subsequently, as our taste develops we may kick away the ladder of canonicity. We must accept that the revered classics tend not to appear appealing at face value. However, once we look beyond the cover and engage with them, we find ourselves affected in unexpected, long-term ways, as countless previous generations celebrated. Emotionality, then, is an important metric in selecting literature but difficult to use as a primary proxy until we have refined our tastes. It is a sense to be cultivated indirectly.

Neither emotionality nor posterity protect us from the fate of the defenders of the Western Canon or Quixote, however. The hidebound critics did read according to considered judgements of the past, and surely were affected emotionally



by powerful works. Quixote was clearly altered fundamentally by what he read. Both types of reader, however, were unable to resist our innate tendency to be led down comfortable rabbit holes. Our expectations of how the world works are conditioned by our frequent experiences—real or literary—which confirm our expectations because we tend to ignore disconfirming evidence, and this becomes how the world *should* work. The hermeneutic circle threatens to become a death spiral.

This disposition is exacerbated by age, because the more confirming experiences we have, the more we believe them true, and the less we consider alternatives. We tend more and more to conform to habit: reading to confirm our beliefs or mentally reenact variations of prior experiences. In the meantime our culture is changing, leading our perception of our world to become less accurate. We remember best the paths we keep walking, and those on which we had significant experiences, but retracing our steps won't take us anywhere new. When selecting texts with the approbation of posterity, we wish to avoid the narrowness associated with the Western Canon's champions, implicit interpretative communities, and the stereotype of the old person who is inflexible, bigoted, and pedantic. How do we select titles that will not contribute to our horizons narrowing, our thinking becoming stereotyped, and our burial in burrows where only echoes resound? How can we grow as we age?

Quixote contorted his world to conform to the fictional universe his novels mutually reinforced; the critics became so enamoured with a particular set of norms and perspectives, that they devalued others and therefore the Other. Ngũgĩ, a

Kenyan subject of British colonisers, saw this problem from the Other's perspective: literature, for him, was shot through with power relations that favoured the "master" (2012, 31). The master's conception of history was that ignorance reigned in countries prior to their arrival, or masters and bondsmen were already existing—people are born one or the other and human nature is unchanging. Further, the current system can't be changed because it's an expression of divine will, and the slave's suffering is justified by an afterlife. Literature written by the master, then, will portray philosophy, religion, history and human nature in fundamental conflict with his adversary, yet it is primarily this literature that constitutes the classics, and the culture that it founded gives rise to so much of Western literature. Accordingly, we take for granted these values, reading into them rather than around them. Enculturated in this mythos, we implicitly expect the world to work in this way, remaining ignorant of how these values affected other peoples and their cultures. That is, we may be aware of the impact of these values and norms, but not that they are merely one set, and therefore highly questionable.

It is our schemata, specifically, that conditions what we expect, and we tend to see what we expect to see. We expect to encounter further expressions of the norms absorbed and explicitly taught, often without even an awareness of alternatives. Formulaic fiction, for example, is easy to read and demands minimal effort because the majority hews to our expectations. By continually applying the same kind of tropes, the genre ossifies our schemata and therefore conditions us to predict what will happen next: we read, expecting the usual outcome. We are usually correct, and to the extent that we're not, the text deliberately subverts

the norm to engineer a similarly formulaic suspense. In her description of white critics ignorant of the racial context of the works they studied, Morrison explains an implication of this disposition: close, careful readers with gaping blind spots (Morrison 1994, 13). These critics didn't expect "meaning in the thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy", so they looked past tropes of darkness, Africanist "othering", and the presence of minority characters. They were often proud that they hadn't read any texts by African-American authors. Attributing this solely to racism, however, overlooks the broader context of schema-driven expectations—seeing what we expect to see is an intrinsic element of this kind of prejudice. We must be conscious of this insidious disposition because overcoming it takes effort. We must ask: what might other readers see that we have blinded ourselves to? To learn we must seek people who think differently to us, and listen.

Rorty described how novels can render visible the suffering of marginalised groups and the Other: the text's illustration of what to look for, helps us come to expect it, and so perceive it more keenly in real life (Rorty 1989, 164). When we learn how other people experience our world we can identify opportunities to help them—directly or politically—or at least avoid contributing to their plight. Bayard urged us to engage in "detective criticism"—not merely observing a fictional world, but inhabiting it and imagining the consequences of specific interventions—to make us more attentive to scandals in the real world (Motte 2011, 273–4). In both of these instances, we must anticipate perceiving in books what would otherwise remain unnoticed, thereby cultivating broader expectations of our world. By allowing us to experience the world from other perspectives at a thoughtful and reflective

pace, novels allow us to notice what our default expectations would have obscured, if we're willing to read with this perspective. To produce such subtle demonstrations without resorting to overwrought didactic explanations, requires the kind of novelist who is generally only recognised by equally attentive critics. As if to prove our point, the novelist's nuanced sketches are easily overlooked by characters in the fictional world, and then again by critics. This further stresses the importance of posterity in identifying these works: the pomp of the bold bestseller conceals what we need to see.

Diversity, however, isn't the same as being politically correct, for that is also a narrowing stance. hooks argued that it is important to "read works by authors who may be racist, sexist, class-elitist, or homophobic" because openly addressing issues of diversity encourages us to interrogate our biases and think critically about how forces of discrimination dominate and intersect (hooks 2010, 106). Refusing to read such authors would have constituted "a tremendous loss" for her identity construction (p. 108). The "radical openness" she endorses is the uncomfortable, cognitively effortful stance we've been describing. To pursue diversity is to explore counterfactuals, read authors who whom you virulently disagree or whose perspectives shock you, experiment with literary forms, and read texts in different ways, employing different interpretative norms. Diverse reading keeps us nimble: grounded yet growing.

If we repeatedly read books which express the same negative prejudices, we risk adopting them and hardening our stereotyped expectations. Yet, Gadamer spoke of prejudices as pre-judgements: the necessary precursor to any judgement, with

neutral connotations (2013, 272–273). Racism and sexism are prejudices, but so are the attitudes inculcated by a steady diet of police procedurals or detective fiction—prejudices need not be overtly hateful to be harmful.

Gadamer's conception reminds us that prejudice pervades and precedes all human thought, including that of authors. Indeed, without schema-driven expectations, without any prejudices, we couldn't have preferences, projects, develop expertise, or judge. Prejudice is ineluctable; yet, our reading can problematise or utilise it depending on our approach. It is convenient to say that we should read with diversity—broadly, considering a wide variety of perspectives to avoid hardening narrow expectations. And it's absolutely true. But we can now see how this is impractical at the extremes. The maximally diverse reader would not be able to read multiple books on the same topic, by the same author, or perhaps in the same field. They'd read Persian poetry, aeronautical manuals, histories of snails, first-person accounts of philately, then collections of Roman rhetoric. They couldn't engage their emotionality.

We will consider this dilemma between the dilettante and the aficionado in terms of literary selection and the attitude with which we read—the latter is discussed later in terms of the aporia of reading. When reading in niches involves reading many similar titles contiguously, it hardens our expectations because the same sort of predictions are continually proven correct. This is Quixote mistaking windmills for giants, and inns for castles—in his obsessive reading of chivalric fiction, this expectation was correct, so he continued to apply it in the world. By alternating between niche reading and that of unrelated titles, you can read deeply, then resurface—familiarising

yourself with the lay of the land before burrowing back in. If the niche is ideological, the interleaving titles can be selected which question or contradict it, thus challenging or refining the prejudices it's forming.

It has been suggested that rather than interleaving disparate titles, you should put down your books, go outside. The real world is presented as the antidote. Perhaps, but we rarely have radical experiences in the real-world that can fulfil this disconfirming function, and even during such a radical experience, we'd be likely to resort to default responses rather than learning in the moment. For real-life to fulfil the role of literature in this sense, the experience needs to be radical, relevantly contrastive, and reflected upon. Life can't be a general solution to this problem; books, however, selected with care and read at a pace appropriate to our assimilating the experience, are well-suited.

When a niche isn't ideological, but more formulaic, there's neither an obvious threat nor an obvious counterpoint to read instead. Emma Bovary's reading of sentimental romance novels led her to transcend her dull, prosaic reality by seeing herself as a heroine of a grand romance. She ran up huge debts to support the lifestyle portrayed by the fiction. She believed the insincere, clichéd, romantic proclamations of her paramour, Rodolphe. When her debts became due, when her lovers abandoned her, faced with disgrace and ruin, she took arsenic to escape. We can imagine how a frequent reader of such literature may avoid coming to Emma's tragic end and live a productive life, yet still pursue, experience, and evaluate romantic relationships according to the genre's unrealistic norms. The threat, then, is that you unconsciously inter-

nalise harmful norms: your real-life expectations gradually become contorted to a fictional model, against which they'll ultimately be found wanting. When the fictional schema clashes with real world experiences, real life seems etiolated, dull, and unsatisfying, so the escapism of the genre becomes more attractive still.

If we choose to adopt a particular worldview, that is our right as autonomous human beings; our concern here is what happens when we absorb one without considering its implications. For niches of this kind, literary criticism and critical theory can act as a prophylactic by demystifying a genre or worldview. By explaining how the niche operates, its archetypes, its assumptions, and its implications, these works arm you. Whether you then choose not to read deeper into the niche, to read it more suspiciously, or engage knowingly, your decision is now conscious.

We read in a field of poles which pull us in different directions. Our task is to consciously assess our distance from them, continually adjusting our path. The self schema of others and ourselves needs to be similar enough to avoid alienation, but different enough that we constitute unique individuals. Our cultural schema needs to reflect those of others in our community so that we share the same reality, but different enough that we can creatively move this culture in new directions. A book should be close enough to our existing schemata that it's understandable, but different enough that it's interesting and productive. To achieve this balance we must alternate between diving downward, then returning to the heights to observe the whole field. A hawk wearing reading glasses.

Distance and diversity, then, become additional criteria for lit-

erary selection. We can now mount a more nuanced response to the question of what we should read by recommending the consideration of posterity, emotionality, diversity, and distance. With these principles in mind, how do we pick specific titles from our overflowing library of literature? How do we find books relevant to our projects, possessing emotional valence, and expressing concepts similar enough to our schemata to be understandable, yet dissimilar enough to be interesting and educational?

One approach is to turn to professional critics: the self-appointed representatives of an interpretative community. Standing between our schemata and books, critics explicitly argue for their own interpretations, promulgate exemplary applications of norms, and clarify them. They help answer the question: what specific titles should I read, or: should I read this?

Firstly we must defang them because professional critics gain too much power over us when we forget that they are also subjective readers whose judgements are relative to a community. The dogmatic critics who promoted *the* Canon and *the* aesthetic theory that explained good taste, had too much dominance, too much authority. They saw some absolute value, some universal theory, some blessed hierarchy of great books. Their ideal reader was, coincidentally, themselves. This is nonsense. The professional critic is an interpreter just like us.

Indeed, we're all critics. For immature readers this likely consists of making qualitative statements of emotional response. Woolf describes this as "a demon in us who whispers 'I hate, I love', and we cannot silence him" (Woolf 1960, 243). A professional critic is expected to be on the other end of



this continuum, possessing more developed literary or topic schemas, wider and more nuanced cultural literacy, greater fluency in making intertextual links, deeper background knowledge to evaluate the text's claims, and greater consciousness of the relevant interpretative norms which enables them to evidence their conclusions. Criticism is justified judgement, with its utility depending heavily on the force of this justification. It can give language and argument to our reactions to texts, demonstrating by example how we can read and judge better.

Ideally, critics can save us the time reading shallow non-fiction by summarising its content concisely and with a more logical structure—in fact, they may provide a more efficient presentation of the original content. This works for bad books, books that should have been articles—the type Bacon urged us to “read by deputy” (Bacon 1985, 209). A book worth reading, however, won't be exhausted or diminished by a review; it will beg to be read, and reread, and reward study. Critics help us glean the essentials from long-winded works, and can introduce us to those valued highest in their interpretative community. If we can separate this function from the notion that they present a single correct meaning of a text, or that their preferences necessarily have priority over ours, critics' carping has its place.

Sometimes the criticism we need doesn't exist, is of poor quality, or we need help refining broader questions of what we should read. When letter writing was commonplace, readers often turned to peers in such situations: exchanging book recommendations and criticism in this way. Correspondents influencing each other. Miller took this to the

point of evangelism, and portrayed sharing a good book with others—physically or by recommendation—as an obligation of a reader (H. Miller 1969, 22–3). This is a viable and valuable approach to finding relevant, worthwhile books, but it’s unlikely that your correspondent network is diverse enough to rely on as your only source of recommendations. Peer recommendations in general, though, have great merit, especially from online reader communities that can effectively constitute a correspondent network of their own—but they can also act as echo chambers. We gain the benefit of peers’ assistance best when we treat such communities as places to visit rather than inhabit: sojourns not settlements.

We now have criteria for literary selection and guides towards books which meet these criteria. Pursuing diversity in reading means veering away from the popular *and* famed, however, so we may need to do without, or supplement, criticism and peers. For non-fiction, the bibliography of one book introduces titles in the same spirit, and when you have a topic in mind, librarians and their bibliographic databases are manna. Yet these resources produce lists, more relevant and personal than bestsellers and great books, certainly, but still at a remove from worthwhile reading material. For fiction, author interviews and the literary press can suggest books in a similar vein, and signals such as author reputation, publisher blurb, and reader reviews, can help, but ultimately they only guide. Nobody can tell you what to read: you need to begin the book and require it prove itself to you; if it comes up short, cast it aside.

For non-fiction, especially, evaluating a book can be made more efficient by performing “inspectional reading”: system-

atically skimming it, then if it still looks like a viable candidate, reading it superficially (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 32–36). Skimming is using the structure of a book—blurb, introduction, table of contents, first and last pages of chapters, conclusion, index, etc.—to determine its relevance in a brief time. Books surviving the skimming and self-examination stages can be examined superficially. This is a brisk reading, breezing past unfamiliar words or difficult sections, in order to answer the question “what is the book about?” (p. 18). Gibbon evaluated a new book by first clarifying to himself what he already understood about the topic such that he felt “qualified to discern how much the author added to my original stock”—if an initial inspection finds it wanting in this regard, it can be set aside; otherwise, this process of self-examination prepares you for focusing on the interesting material (Gibbon 2006, 70). These pragmatic approaches help determine within a limited time whether a book warrants a careful, close reading.

We find books to read, then, by turning to other readers: consulting their lists, and listening to their accounts of how certain books affected them. We are unlikely to be affected in the same way because of the different schemata with which we approach the book, but we hope that ours overlaps with theirs sufficiently that their reasoning will resonate. We validate this hope by inspecting potential titles ourselves, comparing what we know, expect, and feel, to what the book’s macroscopic features suggest.

Having selected a piece of literature, and mindful of the need for diversity in reading, we remain confronted with Lem’s claim that if someone does read, they don’t understand. What

stands between our schemata and a text that makes it more or less meaningful to us, and thus able to affect and stay with us? How do we interpret texts, and why might we fail?

Consider another work inspired by *Don Quixote*: Borges' short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*. It tells of a 20<sup>th</sup> century Frenchman, Menard, who attempts to write—not reproduce, translate, or reinterpret—Cervantes' novel verbatim. Borges' narrator explains (Borges 1998, 91):

Initially, Menard's method was to be relatively simple: Learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918—*be* Miguel de Cervantes.

Modern readers encounter a great distance between themselves and Cervantes' novel: they are unlikely to speak his Spanish, have not had the kinds of experiences or beliefs that he had or his original readers would have been able to relate to, and possess a great deal more knowledge about the world. As absurd as Menard's plan is, it bears similarity to how some readers approach older texts. What is a better way to interpret over this chasm?

Menard “pretty thoroughly mastered seventeenth-century Castilian” in an attempt to bridge the linguistic distance (ibid.). More commonly, even modern Spanish speakers read the work in translation. A translation is just another interpretation, though: to read a translation is to read a reading. A modern English translation of *Don Quixote* not only translates the text into current English but expresses a contemporary interpretation by an English speaker in a more

felicitous fashion for modern ears. Far from the mechanical procedure that translations are sometimes imagined to be, they are actually creative acts that bring the text closer to us by inserting an intermediary: reducing one distance by introducing another.

The first English translation of the *Odyssey*, for example, was made in 16<sup>th</sup> century England by Chapman. It's just about understandable to a modern reader, but the latest translations feel closer to our time, a better fit with how we prefer to read. There have now been over 65 translations of this work in English alone, each constituting an interpretation. Perhaps their readers will stipulate to some facts, and the general plot, but the context of the translator, the word choice, the phrasing, and the rhythm of the text not only feels different for the reader but also draws their attention towards and away from different features. A simple example of this involves whether a translator consistently translates a particular word in the same way—to do so makes themes and intratextual allusions visible, but not to do so can allow the poem's meter to be retained. Other examples abound.

Translation is just one factor in how different people interpret a single work. Hearing an epic poem performed by a travelling bard in a social setting is very different from reading it alone. Peoples that value warriors and heroic individualism, or believe in gods and the supernatural, or some combination, must find different meaning in the *Homerica*, and military veterans, world travellers, and pacifist feminists will likewise form very different impressions. When we interpret we consider the context of the text's production, which will inevitably depend on our knowledge of history and our own community,

with which we can't help but compare. Each generation, each reader, comes to a text from a unique web of influences and backgrounds. The text will always be distant, and this distance greatly affects how we interpret.

In reading a famous text, especially, we come to it with ideas of what it's *supposed* to mean, and implicitly compare it with later developments—hence Menard's aim to forget European history. This is why when we read influential older books they can seem somewhat clichéd, despite being hugely original at the time of their initial publication: the works that they have influenced, have diluted and overused elements that were once original, tropifying them.

We can see that the reader's context deeply conditions their interpretation, but may still dispute that their interpretative norms differ in this way, too. Despite the multifarious background knowledge we bring to a book, it may seem that we broadly judge it by the same, "common sense" standards. For instance, a widespread norm of interpretation is internal coherence: a text is expected not to logically contradict itself. We likewise assume that the author wrote to be understood (Abrams 1989, 126). Genre-specific norms also exist, and it's due to the meta norms of our interpretative communities that certain types of interpretation seem more plausible. Yet, as we saw in our discussion of the Canon, we can't separate norms from values. We naturally judge not only according to our knowledge of culture and related books, but also according to the standards that this reading taught us. Our traditions convey norms and their justifications. Norms and values are interconnected in our schemata with its other content, so we're conditioned in what to expect, desire, and value by our expe-

riences.

Traditions and translations pull us towards texts, while our chronological and cultural separation from the context of the text's production, push us away. A text written in a foreign language is potentially alien to us—unhelpfully distant—but a translation doesn't reduce this distance so much as it replaces it with another one. A modern text from your culture is closer to you, but does the familiarity lessen its potential impact—is distance troublesome per se? In general, then, we need to consider how we can deal with, and benefit from, these distances.

Gadamer suggested that the non-linguistic distances can be addressed with a “fusion of horizons”: those of the reader with those of the text (Gadamer 2013, 305). A horizon is “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 345). We must seek to fuse because we can never inhabit the text's horizon, as Menard suggests, nor could a text entirely inhabit our own. We can never read a text from outside all personal or cultural context: we can never achieve a neutral, “God's-eye” view (McClellan 2014, 97). Horizons are in motion as a result of new experiences, so this fusion is never completely achieved in practice, even for modern texts (Weinsheimer 1985, 177). Our horizons, our schemata, are perpetually changing, unique to us, and unable to be substituted or ignored.

In fusing horizons, the distance that we strive to reduce is between us and the text rather than the author. When Menard was attempting to “*be* Miguel de Cervantes”, he was trying to do the latter, but we can't ever know the mind of the author, we can't find some secret of the text in the author's psyche. The text is autonomous from the author; as Barthes put it:

“the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 1977, 148). Borges’ narrator demonstrates the fallacy of seeking authorial intent by providing scattered biographical data for Menard, showing that he wrote a toadying portrayal of a countess, and identifying “his resigned or ironic habit of putting forth ideas that were the exact opposite of those he actually held”—knowing about him would not illuminate his work, but in fact could distort its meaning (Borges 1998, 93).

We can deem Borges’ story satirical without his specific intent being known. To question the norm of authorial intent is not to deny that it was written by a person for a purpose, but that if we must infer this, we must do so purely from the text. We don’t need to *be* Borges to understand what the text does. In recent memory, Barthes’ position has been accepted by most interpretative communities: the norm of authorial intent has changed, or at least been questioned.

We are kept apart from a text by our schema-driven expectations: Gadamer’s pre-judgements (“prejudices”). In the act of fusion we need to make these prejudices vulnerable; not attempt to shed them—for we could not make any judgements without them—or assume they’re in error, but render them questionable. We can question the text’s prejudices because they’re not entirely ours; we can question our prejudices because the text confronts us with alternatives. Distance can be productive.

The distance between ourselves and our interpretative community is typically too small. We’re so embedded in an implicit community that questioning its norms and values doesn’t typically occur to the general reader. For particularly



contemporary texts, there can also appear to be too little distance between their horizon and ours, with this perceived familiarity robbing us of critical perspective. Contrast reading the *Odyssey* with reading your autobiography. This is why posterity works in literary selection: too close to our eyes, a book blurs. A more modern work may require the reader to take a stance that intentionally increases the distance between themselves and the text so that the text's assumptions become visible.

We can increase, or utilise, this distance by ascertaining whether we consciously subscribe to our community's norms. We can become open to exploring how, say, a psychoanalytic or structuralist reading of our text would look. A feminist reading, for example, applies valuations and norms to reveal the once hidden distance between women and literature which tended to exclude or minimise their presence. We can choose to inhabit different communities by reading their criticism and valued authors, and engaging with them. We can engage because communities are composed of people with whom we can discuss our interpretations, clarify our understanding, and improve theirs. This social dimension spans book clubs, great books programs, seminars, journals, and online discussion groups. It's how authors, critics, and readers come together to hash out their approach, to read in community.

This is the process by which textual interpretation is adjudicated. The typical piece of genre fiction yields an uncontroversial meaning to the solitary reader applying conventional norms; direct contact with the community is unnecessary because the reader has internalised its principles. When a text

subverts these norms, couches key passages in ambiguity, or is particularly challenging, the community's criticism can be consulted for guidance. When criticism is insufficient or lacking, community consensus can be sought. This does not imply that the community need ascribe a singular meaning to a text, but rather that it agrees on certain specific interpretations being reasonable.

When a community can't reach consensus, or when certain interpretations are seen as particularly contradictory or controversial, new norms may be established or communities may schism. Indeed, masterpieces of literature often earn their reputation because they work on communities in this way. Interpretative communities also arise from questions coming from outside the text—be they socio-economic changes, cultural attitudes shifting, or criticism that proposes a different way of reading. Just as in reading we attempt to reduce distance through fusion of horizons, interpretative communities promote techniques for making this distance productive. Menard's approach proposes how texts can be reanimated by questioning certain norms (p. 95):

Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique—the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution. That technique, requiring infinite patience and concentration, encourages us to read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Aeneid*, to read Mme. Henri Bachelier's *Le jardin du Centaure* as though it were written by Mme. Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the calmest

books with adventure. Attributing the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or James Joyce—is that not sufficient renovation of those faint spiritual admonitions?

Céline was a celebrated novelist turned virulent antisemite; to attribute the Christian devotional work, *The Imitation of Christ*, to him is to question the norms of authorial intent and separating artist from work. The technique Borges is describing here involves, in effect, alternative rules of interpretation: the makings of an interpretative community. By changing how works are judged and ordered chronologically, new values are created. The very fact that *Don Quixote* was to be written by a 20<sup>th</sup> century Frenchman, as opposed to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spaniard, Cervantes, alters the context, and thus the timeline, of literature. However, given that his text would have been identical to Cervantes', the actual reproduction is irrelevant: the idea of the contextual shift is itself productive.

Awareness that norms can change, and are changing, demonstrates the contingency of critical judgements and the inanity of dogmatism. Interpretative practices evolve, and as members of interpretative communities, as readers and writers, we all have a role in shaping their norms and values, by suggesting our own and endorsing others'. Woolf believed that "we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance. The standards we raise and the judgments we pass steal into the air and become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work" (Woolf 1960, 244).

An interpretative community is not an egalitarian institution, however. Valued authors and critics have an outsize influence on its judgements and norms, as do the institutions of which

they are often a part. The judgement of a community won't reflect all marginalised voices, and won't be based purely on rational argument. This is the situation for any human institution, of course, but readers can help remedy it by debating controversial decisions or domineering members while amplifying marginalised members, questioning historical and traditional biases, being open to schisms and joining other communities, and being aware that communities exist by the consent of their members.

hooks describes her students who are uncomfortable reading books by people unlike them—women who behave as if they can “only read women”, black people, black writers, or white students who believe that they “can only identify with a white writer” (McLeod 1998). We can share hooks' discomfort with her students discomfort in the context of our diversity discussion alone, but can also see these attitudes as potentially constitutive of interpretative communities, whose scale of values would exclude many books generally deemed classics. Perhaps this represents an over-correction from the centuries of teaching such a homogeneous, unrepresentative canon, but to reject these concerns as ridiculous is to repeat the mistakes of the dogmatic canonisers. Interpretative communities are always threatening to split apart, and sometimes this is necessary, but we can mitigate against it by seriously addressing members' concerns with both compromise and argument.

That interpretation functions in this way troubles those who fear a world where anything goes, nothing is permanent, and meaning is in flux. Cultural change is chaotic in the moment, and can seem jarring, but cultures have always evolved against the backdrop of opposed, interacting, communities. We see

this on the micro-level with how our own schemata change as we have new experiences: the world changes us, we change the world. Meaning and norms have always evolved this way, yet we are still able to make sense of ancient texts such as Homer's because some norms remain stable in major interpretative communities. Literary meaning is not, and is not becoming, hyper-relativist or arbitrary. Communities constrain meaning.

The meaning of a text is not fixed in time and varies across community; but it doesn't mean whatever you want it to mean. Why shouldn't it? For an autonomous, modern, educated reader, why can't *Don Quixote* be a meditation on the Peloponnesian war, or *Madame Bovary* predict the invention of the Internet? The meaning of a book, it turns out, is what other people think is reasonable. Idiosyncratic readings can be productive for creative projects, but don't constitute cultural currency in themselves; the price of a radical reading is persuading others of your interpretation. It needs to be sufficiently novel so as not to simply satisfy existing norms, but sufficiently familiar to be understandable to the community. It can be expressed, discussed, and made public; understood by others because it relies on common standards. However, communities cohere *because* questioning and subverting norms is an unsettling, potentially alienating process: radical interpretations are not purely intellectual exercises in persuasion or argumentation. The cost of minting currency also constrains meaning.

Some of the most culturally significant texts—spiritual and esoteric works, foundational myths, fables, etc.—have a general property of eluding conclusive, singular interpretations. In-

terpretation is required for any text, but with this sort of allegorical work, personal evaluation is demanded. The history of Christianity describes in essence a large-scale project of interpreting an allegorical text, with schisms occurring according to conflicting readings. Each denomination is an interpretive community with its own norms, attempting to constrain interpretation in different ways. For most allegorical texts, such schisms are rare: we tend to allow the community to determine a general interpretation while leaving certain facets contested along reasonable lines.

To speak allegorically or proverbially is to attempt to express personal wisdom, but wisdom cannot be expressed directly because it comprises an entanglement of our personal experiences and knowledge; we can't directly export elements of our schema for others to import. Quixote's squire was illiterate, and often talked by stringing together proverbs: they provided the building blocks of his speech. Others' phrasings and metaphors gave him the words to express himself. People exchange the gnomic content of proverbs, and the context of this exchange colours, but does not dictate, how their interlocutors will understand their meaning. This allows for an abstraction between information and meaning that makes principles both communicable and contextually relevant. Constrained ambiguity of this sort makes interpretations both understandable to a community, but also personal. Authors of such sayings consciously leave a gap between their words and the meaning a reader would be expected to derive, because by forcing the reader to form their own judgement it becomes more meaningful and memorable for that person. To the extent that the reader credits themselves with the insight, the more resonant it seems to their situation:

when we create something, when we feel in possession of it, it integrates more strongly into our self-schema. When derived across interpretative gulfs, ideas become more interesting, meaningful, and memorable because they are ours.

Wilde advised us to reject works that “have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile”, to cast aside dull texts that offer obvious, unambiguous meanings, in favour of those which “possess the subtle quality of suggestion” (Wilde 1997, 73–75). A common trait of works which are praised and reread by the thinkers we profile is that they provide this interpretive freedom by insisting on their distance from the reader. Nietzsche, Emerson, and Montaigne, among others, exemplified this approach by reading allegorical, wisdom literature, reflecting on often aphoristic remarks, then using the wisdom they derived to produce their own work, which was often similarly permissive of multiple interpretations.

Wilde could take this position because he rejected “all argumentative books and all books that try to prove anything” (Wilde 1968, 3). This was conducive to his creative project, but readers who do want to read such titles are faced with the matter of some texts being obscure or misleading, not to permit interpretative freedom, but because they’re playful, malicious, or simply incompetent. When such tactics are suspected, a reader has recourse to community discussion—even if we believe we have successfully interpreted a text, others’ perspectives can reveal problematic interpretative gulfs. We avoid being hoodwinked by learning from the community a sceptical form of interpretation that reveals such trickery. This is similar to the prophylactic function of

criticism mentioned previously, but is now expanded into a defence against intentionally misleading works. Masters of hucksterism, sophistry, and bad faith argumentation can be made to serve us as deconstructed demonstrations of the tools of pernicious persuasion.

In Menard's *Quixote*, the baroness of Bacourt sees the influence of Nietzsche because in interpretation we combine what we read with what we've read—with our schemata (Borges 1998, 93). This making of meaning is both personal and consensus-based, free without being arbitrary. Awareness that we have partial control over interpretative norms, some of which are in flux, affords us creative possibilities while encouraging intellectual humility and debate. We inherit norms through tradition, and negotiate them with an interpretative community, then, but how do we apply them to specific texts?

Ricoeur proposed that as we read, we hypothesise how the text will develop based on our expectations, let the text confirm or disconfirm us, and all the while make additional hypotheses (Ricoeur 1976, 76–9). We are driven by our schemata to pose questions whose answers update our schemata, in a continual loop. The questions are almost always unconscious. Reading around a hermeneutical circle involves circular movements within the text: moving between its parts, its whole, and our schemata, repeatedly, and often effortlessly.

When you consider a book at the level of word and sentence, and how you learned to read, you see how this process works. You have a highly developed schema of how words and sentences are constructed, what words sensibly follow others, and this all happens entirely by habit. You're made aware of this



process only when it fails: when an unexpected word or sentence construction is encountered.

Conceptually, the same process occurs when reading our  $n^{\text{th}}$  detective novel. We are prepared by our prior experience and the genre to ask certain questions regarding the criminal's motivations, the detective's methodology, what the clues mean, etc. We ask and answer these questions automatically because this is how our schemata prepare us. Before reading a piece of formulaic genre fiction you know a great deal of the book's structure, archetypes, expected twists, and topics that will and won't be broached, so the guesses you make are unconscious and tend to be correct. This process hardens your schema, improving your ability to interpret similar novels. We begin reading with generic questions, possibly based on our preconceptions of what the book is about, or its genre, then revise and clarify these questions as we receive more information.

This almost programmatic, unconscious questioning allows us to follow simple plots. When we read in this way, we're led around the well-trodden grooves of our schemata. The schema-driven expectations that condition low-level interpretation lead to books feeling easy to read but neither exciting nor interesting. They feel easy because it takes little cognitive effort to merely confirm prejudices—it can even feel lightly comfortable to be right. Books read this way may still create occasional suspense and elicit weak emotional reactions, but don't engage us. If we merely receive a text by relying on habit, we don't encounter anything new, worth remembering or considering. We can't remember what we don't see, and we don't see what we don't look for.

Sometimes, however, we are confused, surprised, moved,

or intrigued by a text, so our questions become explicit. Either our stereotyped questions don't help, or we're engaged enough to pose our own. Indeed, a function of an interpretative community, *qua* community, is helping us ask better questions of the text and evaluate its answers. Worthwhile books encourage and reward this questioning by affecting us emotionally and intellectually, contributing to our learning from literature. This is how we make our prejudices vulnerable, how we allow texts to change us, to move beyond following the plot or following an exposition. To profit from a book, we must consciously ask something of it.

Questioning drives reading by focusing our attention on aspects of the text that interest us, and then encouraging us to explore them in greater depth. When we're questioning, our attention is focused because we're searching for the answers. We're reading certain parts more carefully, and others more briskly. For weightier books, this single-minded approach, where some material isn't fully attended to, is necessary to avoid being overwhelmed. Classics reward rereading in this spirit: subsequent readings can pose different questions, so focus on different aspects of the text.

We question the text and, as our discussion of prejudices revealed, the text questions us. Following Gadamer and Ricoeur, we can say that to interpret a text is to be in a dialogue with it, and that we're drawn into this conversation when the text says something that interests us: suggesting a matter of mutual concern. We come to see the text not as a series of assertions or pronouncements, but as possible answers to questions that we're motivated to ask. We understand a

question by knowing why it was asked, and actually asking it ourselves. To understand a text, then, we must begin by understanding the question to which it was an answer in its historical horizon. When we ask this question, we understand that there are other possible answers than those provided by the text, opening up the conversation in which we're engaged. That is, we see the question as open; if it were closed, and the text provided a definitive answer, true for all time, there is no conversation to be had. When the question is open, the text is open to our contributions, and the question is asked of us. We do not aim to supply definitive answers, though, but more questions—keeping the conversation going. Interpretation is an ongoing process. One of the ways that the text suggests questions for us is by what it takes for granted, and as this is a conversation, it questions what we take for granted, too. Hence, the conversation with a text is never concluded: new questions always arise.

Making notes of open questions and either the answers gleaned from the text, or the text's failure to adequately resolve them, helps structure our reading, direct our attention, and provide prompts for future reading. By asking relevant and interesting questions, we bring our schemata to mind, prime associated concepts, and test them against the text. This is a creative process that encourages us to form new connections between concepts precisely because we don't rely on the expected connections: we gain the freedom of switching from automatic to manual mode. We feel the buzz of insight generated by linking seemingly disparate notions.

Questioning is a critical stance. Without it, if we do remember anything from the text, it's unthinkingly assimilated into

an existing schema. Texts that are worthy of your time are strengthened by your questioning: they become more meaningful the more critical that you are. A critical stance is a search for truth. We ask: is what this book's saying true? We're obligated to evaluate the answers a text yields in order to understand them. If we haven't understood them, we are unable to learn from them because we want to avoid learning what is false.

True is an epithet we apply to what is useful to believe. Much of what we deem true arises from us internalising the consensus of our communities in our schemata, and here truth finds its force, but what's true for a community begins with the independent beliefs of its members. These arise through reflection and experience. Consensus can occur somewhat organically, with the successful application of new ideas proving their utility, but serious shifts are controversial so require debate: different people have different, communicable beliefs of which they seek to persuade others. Debate is a perpetual feature of a community because its truth is what it finds useful, and what is useful changes as the community and its environment changes. Through critical engagement with literature we can gauge and challenge consensus, testing and refining our schemata so that it reflects what is useful and true.

Books give us new language to do this, proposing re-descriptions of our world that influence our understanding of it, sometimes to the extent that we accept them as true. Rorty talked of "old metaphors...constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors" (Rorty 1989, 7, 16). What is now true became

true as people discussed and applied it, much like how interpretative communities determine meaning. Consensus is how mere metaphors mutate into what we all know.

Reaching consensus not only creates new truth, but also may invalidate old truth: the new metaphor, the new description, meets current needs better than the old, so the new becomes true, and the old is demoted. What do we do with new metaphors we encounter which seem useful, yet have been neither discredited nor adopted? Readers with the requisite background knowledge can evaluate them, and discuss amongst themselves the potential for their being true; other readers benefit from posterity guiding their literary selection. In either case, we can arrest our learning by deeming a new idea true or false too soon. There is more strength in holding such an idea in an open hand than in a clenched fist.

The history of science illustrates this process of metaphors becoming true. Books are published proposing new descriptions of the world, they're understood by only a few, the new description spreads to the wider community, a portion of which rejects the new description in favour of the old, and eventually the description spreads to other communities. Of course, this triumph is the exception; most descriptions of this sort remain between the covers, not gaining our consent to diffuse into our cultural schema. To speak of even scientific truth, then, is to omit the caveat "according to current consensus".

Collingwood described the information in textbooks as "that putrefying corpse of historical thought" because they obscured the process by which current consensus had arisen, erasing its historicity (Collingwood 1939, 75). Primary literature reveals that "the natural sciences have a history of

their own, and that the doctrines they teach on any given subject, at any given time, have been reached not by some discoverer penetrating to the truth after ages of error, but by the gradual modification of doctrines previously held” (p. 2). This gradual modification isn’t a refinement towards perfect truth: we’re always in error, just in different ways to our ancestors. We gain much needed intellectual humility by recognising that the ways peoples have been so wrong about their world is a consequence of how knowledge production works. It’s not an indicator that our ancestors were stupid and that truth progresses from philistines to oh-so-smart moderns, but a reminder that our understanding is always in a Heraclitean flux. The best we can do is what they did—learn from past errors, attempt to form consensus—and exercise restraint when professing certainty over current consensus.

All truth works in this way. Lowell asks: “Do not serious and earnest men discuss Hamlet as they would Cromwell or Lincoln?” (Lowell 1887, 111). We know that Hamlet is not a real person, yet he exists by consensus because his character is so useful for folk psychology. We can discuss Hamlet as an individual because Shakespeare’s creation is part of our cultural schema, and generations of discussion about him have reified his existence. Even clearly fictional falsehoods become real through their use, and vice versa. For example, consider: humors, Hamlet, quarks, and Quixote.

Quixote isn’t real in the same way a quark is because truth is relative to communities and genres. Scientific truth is a standard of truth that a community associates with particular genres, which then refine it further; other types of writing have different notions of what’s true and how to prove it.

The truth of a scholarly work depends on how the field of knowledge that it represents views standards of proof, the properties it expects arguments to satisfy, and the type of claims it permits. Fictional truth, as Lowell suggested, isn't the misnomer it appears to be, and may involve norms such as believability of character psychology, the internal coherence of the metaphysics of its universe and the psychology of its inhabitants, and, for some genres, that it bears a particular relation to the real world. Spiritual communities employ a standard of truth involving coherence with tradition, resonance with the reader's experience, and the pedigree of the author. Anchoring truth to community and genre is important when it has a tendency to escape these bounds to feign universality or assert its emancipation from standards of evaluation. We can choose, therefore, the community within which to evaluate a book.

By making this explicit we can avoid misinterpreting pseudo-scientific claims, conflating a historical novel with a history of the time period, or, in general, devaluing a text by overlooking what it does say in favour of what we think it should say. A book isn't wrong, *per se*, if it makes claims counter to the consensus of other communities. It can provide a beautiful, poetic allegory of an aspect of life which we find both aesthetically pleasing and useful for our thinking, yet is entirely untrue according to modern scientific consensus. The problem arises when we forget what our judgement is relative to: any book is nonsense if evaluated by inappropriate standards.

Consider the works of Freud. They provided hugely influential insights and concepts for thinking about our behaviour, and an intriguing raft of claims that were either disproven or

resisted any kind of proof. Given our modern understanding of truth, it is unhelpful to classify his books as right or wrong. Instead, they can be viewed through different lenses: psychology credits them with some useful notions but discredits many of their specific mechanisms; psychoanalysis promotes their spirit in an almost allegorical way; and historians of intellectual thought trace how Freud's core ideas have influenced subsequent generations.

Human behaviour can be explained on genetic, neurological, cognitive, environmental, and cultural levels. Each explanation may be true by the standards of its field and accord entirely with consensus, but not in itself give us general answers. If even scientific truth is "according to current consensus" and bracketed by the domain, it can't directly resolve our real concerns because they aren't relative to specific disciplines. For any important topic there are multiple perspectives on it, each true in their own way, and so a critical stance encompasses both individual books and their combination. We read with diversity to compare the consensuses of various communities in order to find human truth.

We can speak of science in terms of consensus precisely because scientific claims can be falsified—they permit disproof (Popper 2005, 18–21). Non-fiction genres that occupy the ground between imaginative fiction and science often make non-falsifiable claims. This is perfectly fine as long as this distinction is understood (p. 18). Freud attacked his critics by accusing them of "repression"—his concept—which being non-falsifiable could not be refuted. He wanted his propositions to receive the respectability, and have the power, of scientific claims without formulating them according to scientific stan-



dards. When we evaluate claims, then, we must ask what it would mean to show them incorrect—if they're too vague or broad to allow for such a hypothesis to be formulated, we can deem them unscientific, and so judge them from within more appropriate communities.

Some works exploit this situation by employing the language and metaphors of science to make non-falsifiable claims appear veridical by encouraging the reader to misapply interpretative standards. In this way, a book can request to be evaluated in the context of the self-help genre, say, inviting the reader to lower their guard, but then present claims with the imprimatur of scientific rigour.

Others create the illusion of conveying wisdom, yet leave you unable to specify what you've actually learned. Certain spiritual, self-help, and ideological titles manipulate you into feeling smarter by tickling your ego and making gnostic statements in this way. They hew to our expectations of how wisdom is expressed, pleasantly ossifying our schemas without challenging them. The issue isn't that they're wrong, or merely non-falsifiable, but that they create the impression of truth while being formless. This is pernicious because the reader can feel like they're growing, yet be enveloped in a fog. For a proposition to be a candidate for community consensus it needs to be communicable—if you're unable to even communicate a concept to yourself in your own, specific terms, it constitutes at best an affective mental state.

Evaluating the truth of what we read means attending to our beliefs—what feels useful—while testing them against the consensus of multiple communities, and reaching tentative judgements. It requires consciousness of how truth is created

and maintained so as to avoid descents into dogmatism. Prefer to be all-but certain, leaving open the possibility that you're not entirely correct. This ephectic position makes you more intellectually humble, and thus a more virtuous person, but also a more curious, critical reader.

Yet, if reading critically requires conscious mental effort, somebody reading for relaxation or escape may see it as inimical to their goal. They don't wish to learn or grow, just enjoy the experience; an experience ruined by attempting to step back from the text. This is the fallacy that relaxation requires mindless, uncomplicated, familiar activity—we enjoy being distracted without having to think. The mere fact that reading in this way is valued for sending the reader to sleep demonstrates that it's actually boring the reader. Our minds shift to daydreams in an attempt to find a task worthy of our immense cognitive faculties that we're attempting to squander. When our attention isn't engaged, our minds wander and we feel distracted or bored. The lightest fiction attempts to peg the level of intellectual engagement required only slightly above this boredom threshold. It's faintly pleasant to have our expectations borne out, our hypotheses proven, but only up to a point: there can be no personal or intellectual growth, or even sustained excitement in mere eye exercise. Even relaxation requires a text that challenges and a reader who strives to meet that challenge.

It is nevertheless true that while taking a critical stance we can't concurrently become enchanted by the text. Indeed, Quixote's utter lack of criticality made him superb at entering the fictional world. J.H. Miller describes an "aporia of reading" in this regard, and many other thinkers raise similar

concerns around the issue of reading speed (J. H. Miller 2002, 118–121). This is not the discredited notion of speed reading, but rather the paradox that we need to read fast and slow (*allegro* and *lento*) simultaneously to become engrossed in the fictional world or metaphysical context, yet also look askance: entering into the world of the text and standing back to examine it more critically.

Morrison saw the reader as an artist, combining “willing acceptance coupled with intense inquiry”, simultaneously surrendering and remaining attentive, to the text (Morrison 2006). Nabokov urged that we “remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy—passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers—the inner weave of a given masterpiece” (Nabokov 1980, 4). Henry Miller read with “the right and the left eye” (H. Miller 1969, 36). Wolf learned to *festina lente* (“hurry slowly”): “You read quickly (*festina*), till you are conscious (*lente*) of the thoughts to comprehend, the beauty to appreciate, the questions to remember, and, when fortunate, the insights to unfold” (Wolf 2018, 193). To read fiction for Eco was to suspend both belief and disbelief (Eco 2014a, 260). The aporia of reading is that “you must read in both ways at once, impossibly” (J. H. Miller 2002, 159).

We question the text by contemplating how the part connects with the whole, what is being left unsaid, what assumptions are in play, and what is happening behind the scenes. We also question ourselves in the *lento* mode of reading by engaging in metacognition: how are we thinking about, responding to, and learning from, the material? By monitoring where our minds flit, how our emotional state alters our mood, and how

our attention is attracted and repelled, we begin to understand what the book does to us, and what strategies for concentrating on and being changed by a text are personally effective. We must read ourselves while reading others.

Without allegro reading, however, we can't fully enter into the book's context. This can be seen in the suspension of disbelief necessary to explore a fictional world, but is no less important when reading title from the humanities. In the latter case, we must maintain a great deal of context given the author's previous claims and their implications, so as to follow the arguments as they unfurl. Stepping back from the text to read *lento*, distracts us from this context, yet without it we're merely enchanted, led by the nose. We're not fusing horizons, we're vanishing into the text.

We read *lento*, seek truth, in order to learn from the text. Learning is the modification of our schemata to incorporate new, true knowledge that can be recalled at a later date in a useful manner. It is the means by which a book continues to influence us after we have read it, via facts, specific impressions, and insights. Purely allegro reading makes this difficult because we finish the book with perhaps an emotional reaction, and rough recollections of some plot points, concepts, or character names. Maybe. In any case, these memories are likely fleeting. This is unfortunate because memories of books allow us to make intertextual links that enrich our literary enjoyment, provide insights into lives, reveal the workings of our world, and fuel our creativity. For Sontag, reading is "the passport to enter a larger life", for hooks, "part of the path to communion and community", for Sedgwick, a way of reparatively exploring cultural-historical

counterfactuals (McLeod 1998; Sedgwick 2003, 146–150; Sontag 2007, 209). Rorty saw literature as providing us new “moral vocabularies” that allow us to see “more and more traditional differences... as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation”—a moral education (1989, 192).

Texts can also teach us what interests us, what kind of connections between concepts bring us pleasure and invite intrigue, to the extent we engage in metacognition. That is, it’s possible to be unaware of what texts do to us, but if we listen to our reactions, they clarify ourselves to ourselves, and guide our learning.

We experience pleasure in finding things out, learn and remember what interests us, and active questioning focuses our attention on this material. Quixote developed an encyclopedic memory of the world of chivalry not by explicitly studying his novels but because each one reinforced the other and he was passionately interested, personally invested in them. However, in scholarly and business contexts when the selection of material is outside of our control, and when we encounter tedious sections of reading material we have chosen, we tend to resign ourselves to learning without interest. This is how we ended up with rote memorisation, cramming, and passing over the text without thought—in the absence of interest we substituted brute force.

If we lack interest in what we wish to learn, we need to cultivate curiosity by asking different questions which are relevant to the text but that also animate us: we need to find an angle from which it can be interrogated. If the questions arise from a subjective angle they allow the emotional resonance of

a story or argument to connect with our personal experiences, forging memories that are not just strong, but deeply meaningful. This is the thread that connects different forms of learning from texts: by taking the perspective of others, by contemplating ourselves in different contexts, by paying attention to what excites us, we encounter new material in a state receptive to learning.

Our questions help reduce the distance between our schemata and the text by relating what we know to what we read, but for learning to be possible this gap must be appropriate. Too little distance and there's little to learn; too much distance and we lack the pre-existing mental concepts to connect to the new. This is most obvious when we have no pretence of comprehending a particular text, e.g. one written in an alien language, highly advanced mathematical literature, abstruse philosophy. This isn't a problem because we recognise that the text is too challenging, so don't even attempt comprehension let alone interpretation. The difficulty arises when we misunderstand the distance between our schemata and text.

Our schemata develop organically, through experience, cultural literacy, and formal education. Pedagogy tends to carefully modulate the degree of challenge the material being taught poses by a process of gradation, but outside of higher education, we lack this formalism. This leads us to undertake texts which bore us because they pose no challenge, or frustrate us because we unknowingly lack sufficient background knowledge. It threatens self-directed study and leaves us vulnerable to charlatans and crackpots. To remember what we read we must feel that we understand it, we must be able to sufficiently connect it to our existing knowledge. Our task,

then, is to control the distance between our schemata and the text in such a way that it's interesting and productive.

In doing this, we seek to avoid what Adler described as the “vice of verbalism”: being able to parrot what we read without connecting it to existing knowledge (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 128). We can moderate our distance from a text by expressing the concepts we read about in our own words and generating concrete examples of them. This brings the distant text closer to our schemas in a personal way. By expressing an idea using concepts and language more familiar to us, it becomes easier to assimilate, and gains more connections to our existing knowledge. However, if our re-phrasing closes too large of a gap, our conclusion is reductive: we may have augmented our knowledge, but haven't really understood the text—it's too distant from us. This scenario implies that the text poses too great a challenge.

Nietzsche's approach to texts exemplified a *lento* reading whereby he read wisdom literature, coined aphorisms by meditating on his reading, then remembered those. He read with sufficient critical attention to not only understand the text, but creatively interpret the sentiment in a way that interested and animated him. He understood and made memorable his reading.

Learning, then, involves understanding and memory, and the former doesn't guarantee the latter. Bayard suggested that we forget the majority of what we read (Bayard 2007, 47–8). This takes the form of literally not remembering that we've read a particular book, retaining a hazy memory of its outline, forming incorrect beliefs, or believing that we remember it only to find when we try to explain it to somebody else that we're

sorely mistaken. Until we test our recall, we overvalue it.

When recalling a book, we tend to rely on event or role schemas to fill the gaps in our memory and make the recollections cohere. So, a regular reader of detective novels may indeed be able to describe a particular book with reasonable accuracy because they remember a few plot points, and integrate them into their detective novel schema. This becomes confidently incorrect when the schema is subverted by the text. When we read without trying to remember, what we do recall will be scattered and rarely what we wish we'd remembered. We don't know what we know until we try to recall it.

This can feel frustrating and we may blame our memories, but forgetting is adaptive. Metaphors of our brains as video recorders and computer disks are radically unhelpful because they cause forgetfulness to seem like a bug, like a shortcoming. Cognitive activity always involves trade-offs between mental effort, utility, and flexibility. It's necessary to forget in order to generalise, otherwise important themes and ideas would become obscured by all the extraneous information the text included. We need to prune irrelevant connections between mental concepts so that we can creatively produce our own. If a reference to a book we read churned up memories of its entire contents we'd be overwhelmed, drowned in detail.

Another reason that we forget so much of what we read is because it doesn't seem worth remembering. Photographic memory is a myth, but if we could recall a novel in this way, what would we do with all of that information? It may have been relevant to our comprehension as we were reading, but recalling it years later is of no use. Put another way, even if



we had remembered it, the fact that we wouldn't have had recourse to recall it would lead to our forgetting it through disuse. We often don't remember because we don't pay attention, and we don't pay attention to material which doesn't seem sufficiently relevant to our interests. The problem here then isn't forgetting *per se*, but ensuring that our idea of what's worth remembering tallies with that of our reading brain.

Memorising a whole book is neither practical nor desirable. Students may object that being able to memorise a textbook would indeed be a wonderful ability, but this exposes another misconception about memory. Even if we were capable of memorising a book, it would exist as an opaque blob in our minds. It would have few if any connections to our schemata. Not only do we fail to understand it, we're also liable to forget it quickly. We could perhaps recite the text in memory until we arrive at section relevant to an examination question, but few serious exams reward mere feats of memory.

We *can* memorise a passage on a topic about which we know nothing in a language which we don't speak. But what's the point? Bacon saw memorising shorter passages as beneficial for rhetorical reasons (Bacon 1985, 209). Carroll and some of his peers had therapeutic motivations: reciting inspiring, reverent, wise remarks would help get them through tough times when the book was unavailable (Wakely-Mulroney, 194–5). In this context, Carroll used his memory for something it's poor at: he tried to remember not the concepts, spirit, or certain expressions from a text, but to inscribe verbatim lines on his mind. This fell out of favour among educationists because they realised that, while it may be impressive for a child to recite a famous poem, say, it wasn't actually teaching them any-

thing.

Even if we perfectly understand the text and remember it, we may still fall short of learning what is true if the text is wrong or our schemata are deficient. We have discussed the first case in terms of literary selection and critical reading—avoiding poor books and reading *lento* to notice falsities. The second case is hinted at by our discussion of how schemas tend to grow organically. When they develop in combination with practical applications and a diverse range of reading, this may be adequate, but what are the consequences of trying to reduce the distance between a worthwhile text and a distorted schema?

We often feel that we understand novels because they're founded on our highly-developed schema of folk psychology, which we form from fiction and our lifetime of experience with other people. We intuitively grasp how people act, how their behaviour affects them, and can take their perspectives. For other genres, however, this foundational schema may be lacking or absent. We've mentioned extremes like a non-mathematician reading advanced mathematical texts, but often the distinction is more subtle. We already know something about the topic we're reading about, but not the extent and accuracy of that knowledge.

Accordingly, in order to learn from non-fiction, Bain suggested that we need to form a firm, consensus-based topic schema, by beginning study with a "textbook-in-chief". This need not be a textbook, *per se*, but a book with similar properties: a methodical structure, up-to-date, relatively comprehensive without being exhaustive, offering memorable and explanatory illustrations of concepts, and representing the prevailing view of the topic rather than the author's

idiosyncrasies. The notion that we should begin studying a topic with a book that has certain features is useful, but having discussed truth and Collingwood's objection to textbooks, we can tweak Bain's requirements.

Our textbook-in-chief isn't even ostensibly authoritative because, as we have seen, no book can be; it should be the beginning of a program of diverse reading. It's an up-to-date, comprehensive overview of the domain, that nevertheless promises to grow outdated. It addresses Collingwood's objection by presenting the history of the relevant ideas and their genealogy. The key controversies and debates are described, along with how the methodology has evolved. By directing the reader to many other texts in the domain, it decentralises its own authority and aids in literary selection. It possesses meta-critical self-awareness in acknowledging its own limitations and what it consciously omits, both as a matter of intellectual honesty, but also as an example of how to read other texts critically. This prepares the reader to understand that the field is dynamic and contested, not a monolithic body of knowledge transmitted by tradition—showing that knowledge is constructed through dialogue and disagreement.

Our talk of study and learning in this context does not imply anything formal or scholarly, simply the attitude of a serious person towards knowledge. Say that you're interested in the theory of evolution—not in an academic sense, just curious. A modern polemic on how evolution isn't true has just been published, and is entertaining to read; thought-provoking, perhaps. But without a firm, consensus-based schema, you can't judge it; or, specifically, you can't evaluate its

scientific truth. By contrast, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* is a classic of science, of great historical interest, but hopelessly outdated in ways that won't be obvious without the appropriate background.

Both of these books may be worth reading, but before you do so, you should build a foundation. We attempt to either assimilate new knowledge into existing schemas or accommodate it by forming new schemas, so when you have a misguided schema, you'll contort relevant information into it, or discard it entirely because it fails to cohere. Accordingly, if we begin with the polemic, the popular iconoclast, a critique of the orthodoxy, or an overview shorn of all nuance, we risk building a distorted view of the topic that may not be apparent for quite some time.

We can see this idea at work in Planck's observation that "A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it" (Planck 1949, 33–34). A specialist with expertise forms a dense schema around foundations thought to be solid at the start of their study, but when these foundations begin to be questioned and dismantled by others, the individual is unable and unwilling to uproot their entire model, so dogmatically defends it until their death. They interpret threats to their foundations as personal attacks. It is their successors, unburdened by this lifetime investment in outmoded concepts, who can innovate. Our consideration of diversity and truth suggest attitudes that can resist this fate: we delay becoming dinosaurs by beginning from a firm footing, and walking with cautious steps in a variety of directions. Forming

convictions, but treating them as hypotheses to be disproved.

The textbook-in-chief, then, provides a caveat to Johnson's notion of pleasure driving what to read. Johnson was accused of desultory reading, a bugbear of his peers, but we can now see that when you develop taste and read on topics that you have a consensus-based schema for, your reading can be freer, more whimsical, if you choose.

We see here a solution to the dilemma of wanting both the new and the true — if we wish to explore the controversial and latest works in a field, we must do so from a position that allows us to consider their claims. The textbook-in-chief represents a principle for reading non-fiction. It's an antidote to being misinformed by the popular, easy read on political topics, health and nutrition, personal finance, scientific advances, etc.

Bringing material from books closer to firm topic schemata helps us understand what we read, but it's still subject to forgetting. For a book to have a more permanent effect on us, this understanding needs integration into our long-term memory. It is necessary to express a text's contents in our own words on some permanent media.

Generic note taking, effectively rewriting a book in summary form, may be helpful for a textbook-in-chief, but is not how most people want to read. Note taking should be a creative activity, involving insight—flashes of inspired connections between concepts—which keep it relevant to you and engaging. It can, however, distract us from allegro reading, so chapter and section breaks can be used as points from which we can pivot between reading and writing—annotating the text provides reminders to take notes at a later point.

Collingwood explained: “whenever I had a cub to lick into shape, my pen is the only tongue I have found useful”. This is why we need to write our reading. In writing we are required to recall what we already know, strengthening the connections that we bring to mind, and storing new memories in their company. We write to know what we know. If writing is combined with teaching others, the effort to express our knowledge in a fashion suitable for people with different schemata helps clarify the limits of our knowledge and suggests questions we may not have considered. This is another reason to participate in discussion groups and make our reading social.

Writing notes helps begin the process of consolidation. This is the cognitive mechanism by which short-term memory traces are encoded into long-term memories. Carroll talked of the need to digest what we read, Nietzsche of walking to achieve the same end, and Schopenhauer of contemplation. This stage of consolidation is so easily overlooked. With the deluge of new titles available to read, it’s tempting to put down one book then pick up the next, but this blunts their power. The new material confuses the old because the old is still in flux: we haven’t absorbed it yet. Distance in time is required between books because we’re reading to be affected; not to read. In fact, Schopenhauer effectively asks: why read when we can think something out for ourselves, advising us not to take up a new book until we again need somebody else to think for us (Schopenhauer 1974, 493–4).

The quantification of reading that encourages rapid turnaround of reading materials is an anathema: care little for how many books you’ve “read”, but for how much you’ve learned. And this applies equally to fiction: finishing the book

requires you to think back to the beginning; *finis* is not the end. Without this meditative period, so much of the depth of a book remains hidden. A *denouement* is a prompt for you to reconsider what you read in light of the whole. Montaigne did this “through an ingenious system of notations at the end of each volume. Once forgetfulness has set in, he can use these notes to rediscover his opinion of the author and his work at the time of his original reading.” (Bayard 2007, 51).

Books are truly useful to the extent they affect you, and you only learn if these effects persist. We’ll still forget even somewhat consolidated memories unless we make use of them, recall them. They decay through disuse. Some material benefits from being practically applied, with each application forcing the recall thus re-remembering of the idea. When we can apply the new knowledge to our projects, our understanding of ourselves and others, and employ it in our decisions, it gains a new kind of purchase on our memories. Knowledge is for the hand as well as the mind.

Rereading the text or your notes is an ineffective aid to consolidation because it’s passive. It tends to produce an illusion of understanding. If we wish to consolidate specific information, we need to recall actively, e.g. write what we think we learned, then verify our accuracy. The effort of retrieval is what matters: by recollecting knowledge we identify gaps in our understanding and re-encode existing memories. In general, some form of spaced repetition using software such as *Anki*<sup>1</sup> is recommended. These programs infer when your memories of concepts for which you’ve created flashcards are likely to decay, and prompt you to recall them before this point: the pro-

---

<sup>1</sup>See <https://apps.ankiweb.net/>

cess of recollection helps solidify the memory for the longer term. If we create flashcards for interesting concepts and insights we encounter in our reading, expressed in our words, and habitually review them according to the schedule the software suggests, we improve our chances of learning from what we read.



We must read in a circle because we live in a circle. Our experiences affect our conceptions of the world, and our updated conceptions affect our experiences. We want to move in ever-expanding circles that themselves are composed of circles such that our schemata grow broader and deeper. We wish to write our autobiography by integrating these experiences into our self-schema. Yet we're disposed to circle like a goat on a stake, a moth around a flame, or a sprinter around a track.

We tend towards these stereotypes due to schema-driven expectations, confirmation bias, tunnel vision—our attraction to what we know. This is cognitively undemanding: our attention is diffuse and often elsewhere because it's not hugely necessary. A consequence of rarely seeing anything new and exciting, and not paying attention to what we do see, is that there is little to learn or remember—so we forget.

To combat this narrowing, to allow books to change and expand our horizons, we approach reading as a skill to be honed. We select titles according to principles involving posterity, emotionality, and our developing taste, in conscious pursuit of diversity. We read over distances which are made productive when we attempt to fuse horizons with the text



rather than attempting to occupy its site of production or become its author.

Interpretative communities constrain meaning by perpetuating norms and values, helping us pose better questions to ask a text, and skilfully evaluate its truth. They keep us connected to others. We recognise our membership in these communities and can choose to inhabit others.

Literary truth, like literary meaning, is a product of community consensus, so varies over community, genre, and time. Even when we apply the norms of our interpretative community to a text by engaging in a logic of question and answer, we face an aporia of reading such that we simultaneously need to enter into the context of the text and also remain at a remove to judge it critically. We question the text and ourselves.

We learn from texts which sufficiently challenge us when we can build upon a firm foundational schema, then express the relevant ideas and concepts they impart in our own words and with our own examples. We become better readers when we practice making ourselves vulnerable to worthwhile texts, and reading them with the care and attentiveness that allows them to stay with us.

We encircle worlds through reading, moving backward and forward through time, crossing borders freely, when we are driven to situations that challenge and engage. We do so from within communities and as we expand our own schemata, we aim to improve those of our community, too.



Around, past Parnassus, Simorgh,  
from flocking fledglings to our soaring  
independence, out of the  
warming current, the glaring sun,  
closer still to the horizon,  
returning with songs of our own:  
an eye on distant, drifting land,  
an eye for the life it hides, and  
the claws to carry it with us.

# Profiles

## Abrams, Meyer Howard (1912-2015)

Abrams was an American literary critic and theorist.

He believed that even the non-theorist can better understand a book if they're aware of the different types of theory for doing so. When we use "common sense" to judge and discuss books we are implicitly using unsystematic and desultory concepts that derive from earlier critics who orientated them in theoretical structures (Abrams 1989, 30). We unconsciously adopt a particular theoretical stance and the associated implicit assumptions, criticising what we read in terms of what we were taught in school, approaches adopted from book reviews, and how experts talk about books. Yet this ad-hoc, hodgepodge of assumptions, is unexamined and disjointed. If we gain familiarity with a range of theories, Abrams suggests, we become more aware of what we're actually doing, and see possibilities for doing something different.

We can think about any literary work, or "poem" in Abrams' terms, as something that "is produced by a poet, is related in its subject matter to the universe of human beings, things, and events, and is addressed to, or made available to, an audience of hearers or readers" (p. 3). In each type of theory one of these elements is elevated, and the rest made subservient. On this basis a taxonomy of theories develops as follows.

*Mimetic* theories suggest that the poem reproduces, imitates, or represents the world. Literature is regarded as a mirror of nature, so the "focus of attention is thus on the relation between the imitable and the imitation, and the primary aesthetic criterion is 'truth to nature,' or 'truth to reality'" (p. 7). Using this approach we evaluate books by how accurately

they conform to our experience the world. Authors are great according to their acuity of observation.

A *pragmatic* theory “sets a poem in a means-end relationship, regarding the matter and manner of imitation as instrumental toward achieving certain effects in the reader” (p. 8). The poet intends to instruct or please us, and does this by deliberately making an object to achieve specific ends (pp. 9–10). For example, a text aiming to improve the reader’s moral character is good if its audience becomes more moral. Such authors are judged by their inherent powers and skills—their nature and art—in constructing a poem that fulfils its aims (p. 11). We can envisage a text that, because it’s highly faithful to nature, comprising accurate poetic descriptions of natural beauty, we judge favourably on a mimetic basis. However, because it does not bring us particular pleasure, we regard it a failure on pragmatic terms.

In *expressive* theories “the poet moves into the center of the scheme”, becoming “the prime generator of the subject matter, attributes, and values of a poem” (ibid.). The source of the work lies not in the external world but in the poet, so poetry is “the language of feeling” (p. 14). This means that “the art of affecting an audience, which had been the defining attribute of poetry in pragmatic theory, becomes precisely the quality that invalidates a poem”: “The mirror held up to nature becomes a mirror held up to the poet, or else it is rendered transparent” (pp. 13–14).

*Objective* theories focus on the formal aspects of the poem, the text itself. They include “the heterocosmic model, in which each work constitutes a unique, coherent, and autonomous world” and “the contemplation model, in which each work

is a self-sufficient object that is contemplated disinterestedly for its own sake” (p. 18). The contrast between these theories and mimetic theories is striking: a work judged exceptional in mimetic terms would likely fail utterly in an objective light. The truth of an objective poem is in its internal coherence whereas the truth of a mimetic poem is in its correspondence to the real world.

Science fiction demonstrates this distinction well, and points to a broader implication of Abrams’ analysis: if we implicitly value only a single aspect of literature, we reject huge swathes of works that are written in a different manner. Further, if we’re unaware of what underlies our judgements, we won’t realise what a more adaptable approach would yield.

These traditional theories were upended by more recent theorists who maintain that “there are” no right readings” of any poem, hence...a critic is liberated from his traditional subordinacy to the work he comments on, and in fact achieves the production of meaning...that earlier critics had mistakenly attributed to the author of a work” (p. 27).

So, criticism needs theory, but there are many diverse types of theory, and Abrams doesn’t regard developing a new one or prioritising an existing one as viable. Instead, he advocates pluralism: these theories “may in fact serve as alternative and complementary procedures for doing the critic’s job, with each theory, from its elected vantage, yielding distinctive insights into the properties and relations of poems” (p. 30). Awareness of this taxonomy allows us to adopt the approach we deem appropriate for a particular poem, or more usefully, allows us to apply different theories to different parts of the poem.

Where does this leave meaning? By insisting on one particular theory being correct, the criteria for determining a work's truth are relatively straightforward. But a pluralistic approach to interpretation makes absolute certainty of a poem's meaning impossible: different theories yield different meanings. Instead, we should aim at interpretations that we can be reasonably warranted in believing.

Achieving this requires us assuming that the author wrote to be understood and produced sentences "designed to have a core of determinate meanings" (p. 126). Indeed, for a work or interpretation to succeed, writer and reader need common ground before either begins their task (p. ix). There's a "partial circularity" at play (p. 400). Both parties need "some grounds for imaginative consent, some comparative ordering of values, some readiness of emotional response to the matters shown forth" (p. 134). We come to the text, then, believing that the author wants to be understood and is employing the linguistic and literary norms that we have in common (p. 126).

We validate our assumptions and interpretations with other competent readers who share in these norms and our "expertise and tact" (p. xi). By talking with them and reading their criticism we obtain reasonable assurance of what the author meant. We can also test our interpretation by making it public, permitting our peers to confirm or falsify our understanding (p. 126). This isn't an obligation to publish an academic paper on what we read, but just to discuss our perspectives with others. Even the best criticism, therefore, is never certain, but it is rational, it is evidentiary, when it produces valid knowledge about texts (p. ix).

Explicitly considering the type of theory we're employing when we read, subscribing to the general norms of competent readers, then discussing our interpretations becomes a way to gain better comprehension of books, as Abrams demonstrated by example with his extensive critical oeuvre and thoughtful responses to his critics (pp. 113–134 (e.g.)).



## **Adler, Mortimer J. (1902-2001)**

Adler<sup>2</sup> was an American philosopher and educator.

He identified in his students a fundamental misunderstanding about reading: they tried to read every book at the same rate, which “may be either too fast or too slow for a particular work, but in any event is wrong for most” (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 315). If we read poor books slowly and carefully we waste our time, neglecting better books. If we read good books too quickly, we fail to comprehend their full value. It is vital to understand, Adler insisted, “how to read some books faster than others” (ibid.). This requires adopting a reading strategy appropriate for a given book.

The strategies Adler suggests are primarily concerned with reading for understanding. They can be adapted to read for entertainment or information, but we will concentrate here on expository works. For such books to be even potentially worth reading there must be an “initial inequality in understanding” between us and the writer. Further, this inequality should be possible for us to overcome to some degree (p. 10). The book should be sufficiently difficult or we will not gain new understanding.

We begin a new book by skimming it systematically, which helps determine in a limited time whether it deserves a deeper reading (p. 32). Is it potentially useful to us: relevant to our interests and sufficiently challenging? We glance at the title page and preface to get the gist of its subject and broadly classify

---

<sup>2</sup>He originally wrote his main work on this subject, *How to Read a Book*, by himself, but the later edition was co-written by Charles van Doren. For convenience we’ll talk in terms of Adler.

it; examine the table of contents for an overview of the work's structure; consult the index to identify the range of topics covered and the most important concepts (by number of references); read the jacket copy; glance at chapters which appear central to its argument, concentrating on summary statements at their beginnings or ends; and dip in here and there, reading the odd paragraph or two, not failing to read the final few pages (pp. 32–36). This should take at most an hour (p. 35). If the book holds no value for us, we can set it aside.

If we continue with the book, our next step is “superficial” reading. This is a rule for tackling a difficult work for the first time: “read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things you do not understand right away” (p. 36). Having decided that the book is worth reading, this allows us to quickly establish whether it contains information of importance to us; only if it does do we reread it analytically.

Taken together, systematic skimming and superficial reading constitute the “inspectional” level of reading. They help us answer the question: “what is the book about?”, and lead the way to the next level of reading: “analytical”. This is a deep reading without time constraints. We haven’t grasped a complicated book until we’ve uncovered the “skeleton hidden between its covers”, until we understand both its parts and how they connect to make a unity (pp. 75, 77). It is how we answer the question, “what is the book about as a whole?” (p. 94). This requires us to express the theme or main point in a sentence or two, then list its major parts and show how these are related and organized into a single work (pp. 75–76).

Knowing the author’s main point, we can now enquire as to what questions they sought to answer (p. 92). This requires

us coming to terms with the author through attentiveness to their technical vocabulary and the common words that they employ in a specialised sense—identifying the words that give us trouble (p. 102). Then, we can discover their meaning from context or reference books (p. 113).

At the heart of a book are the author's "major affirmations and denials" (p. 121). Having come to terms, we identify the critical sentences, select the propositions they contain, then reassemble the author's arguments (pp. 120, 136). Sometimes this will involve extracting the key claims, and other times we need to construct them by combining multiple sentences. In either case, we want to find the author's key propositions: what they're claiming. Having identified these propositions, we must state them in our own words and invent concrete examples to illustrate them (p. 171). Otherwise we're vulnerable to the "vice of 'verbalism'"—the "bad habit of using words without regard for the thoughts they should convey and without awareness of the experiences to which they should refer" (p. 128). When we can only parrot an author we're unable to analyse their arguments and relate them to others (p. 126).

At this stage we ask of the book: "is it true?", and if so, "what of it?" (p. 165). We determine which of the author's questions they successfully answered; and of those that they didn't, were they aware of this failure (p. 136)? Having understood a book, and only then, are we obliged to criticise it by agreeing, disagreeing, or suspending judgement (p. 138).

The principle ways to disagree with a book are to show where the author is uninformed, misinformed, or illogical. In disagreement we should be neither disputatious nor contentious,

“view disagreement about matters of knowledge as being generally remediable”, and give specific reasons for our disagreements (pp. 151, 156). Or, we may agree yet show that the book is incomplete, and so suspend judgement on the book as a whole (p. 164).

If we judge that the book is true in some sense, then we must determine what significance it has (p. 165). Reading for enlightenment, Adler suggests, is a never-ending process which is always renewed by asking: “what of it?” (pp. 165–6). We’re not finished with a book when we reach the end: if it is to benefit us, we must evaluate its arguments and repeatedly enquire as to their consequences.

If part of a book seems unintelligible, despite making our best attempt to follow these rules, and only then, it may be useful to go outside of the book by consulting other sources such as reference books (p. 169). Commentaries and abstracts should be used sparingly because we may be unduly influenced by the commentator, and if we become dependent on secondary literature, we are unprepared for reading books without commentaries (pp. 174–175). The great authors “carried on a conversation with other authors”, so when we’re stuck on canonical books it can help to read related books “in relation to one another and in an order that renders the later ones more intelligible” (p. 173).

Having mastered inspectional and analytical reading, we have learned to read different books at different speeds. We can now combine these skills to reach the fourth, “syntopical”, level of reading: using multiple books on the same subject to address a particular problem in which we’re interested (p. 317). This involves compiling a tentative bibliography of relevant titles,

which we reduce to a manageable size by reading its entries inspectionally (p. 314).

We consult the titles that remain by using inspectional reading to locate the passages relevant to our problem. Then we employ analytical techniques by establishing a neutral terminology to which we bring the author—forcing them to use our language rather than “coming to terms” as we did earlier (p. 318). We’re still trying to avoid the vice of verbalism, but now in the sense that if we privilege the terminology of a single author we may fail to understand others who use different terms (*ibid.*). Our purpose here is finding how the books we’re considering address the problem we’re interested in exploring, then restating their arguments in a way that permits comparison between authors.

Where we previously derived the author’s questions, now we need to ask our own which illuminate our problem and are potentially answered by our authors—even if the authors wouldn’t have recognised our questions (p. 319). The truth, if it is to be found at all, is in “the conflict of opposing answers”, not in final answers (pp. 322, 324). So, we define and arrange the controversies, show how and why different authors answer the questions differently, and support this with quotations (pp. 321–323). We must “look at all sides and... take no sides”, achieving “dialectical objectivity” (p. 324). This is difficult, so demands of us a conscious effort to balance their accounts, avoiding overemphasis, underemphasis, or resorting to prejudice (p. 325). Achieving this balance means that we have understood something that mattered to us and can potentially make an original contribution to a field.

As we proceed through these levels of reading, we are obliged to answer four questions: “what is the book about?”, “what is being said in detail, and how?”, “is the book true, in whole or part?”, and “what of it?” (pp. 46–47). The “*art* of reading” is the honed ability to precisely answer these questions: the active reader develops a habit of questioning themselves and the author (p. 48). In this spirit, annotating the book with notes of our agreement or differences with the author, and marking key passages, is indispensable, because it keeps us alert, encourages expressing our thoughts, and aids our memory of the ideas we encountered (p. 49).

We read well, then, when we adjust our reading strategy to both our purpose and the book: when we use the time we save from avoiding inappropriate titles to objectively analyse and compare their important counterparts. To improve in reading skill requires engaging with demanding books which are initially over our heads (p. 339). But in reading a good book you “learn more than how to read better; you also learn more about life” (p. 341). You become wise in that “you are more deeply aware of the great and enduring truths of human life” (ibid.). Adler recommends that you should particularly seek out “the few books...to which you will want to return to over and over” because each time you do, they “can lift you again”: “help you to grow” (p. 344).

## Bacon, Francis (1561-1626)

Francis Bacon was a philosopher, essayist, lawyer and statesman.

Reading, for Bacon, was inextricably tied-up with writing and conversing. He termed this combination *study*. Study is used by wise people for a particular purpose, such that they neither admired nor condemned it, but recognised “a wisdom without them and above them, won by observation” (Bacon 1985, 209). To be useful, study must be combined with experience.

Reading, for example, can serve for “ornament”—improving our discourse—by providing examples of rhetoric, useful arguments and expressions (ibid.). Yet without a great memory, we’d forget these, so need to write them down. And without experience in public discourse, book-learned ornamentation leads us to speak with affectation (ibid.). To this end he collected “formula” from his reading (Bacon 1879, 208):

decent and apt passages and conveyances of speech, which may serve indifferently for differing subjects.... For as in buildings there is great pleasure and use in the wellcasting of the stair-cases, entries, doors, windows, and the like: so in speech, the conveyances and passages are of special ornament and effect

Or, reading can serve to make us more able in practical matters, improving our ability in “the judgement and disposition of business” (Bacon 1985, 209). People who haven’t studied “can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs come best from those that are learned” (ibid.). Reading can teach

the general principles that experience by itself yields only, if at all, in old age. However, to “make judgement wholly by [study’s] rules is the humour of a scholar”—knowledge, again, must be combined with experience (ibid.). Note further that Bacon’s “business” was primarily his judicial and political employments, which involved not just sound judgement but also a great deal of conversation.

Reading can also serve for “delight”, contemplating in seclusion (ibid.). This describes Bacon’s scholarly activities, where he wasn’t content to merely republish or explicate maxims, but moved from (p. 27):

reading which has finished and is displayed in a literary mortuary (where men have thought this aphorism, or that, or that; and they have left it dead or rootless) to readings which cannot be finished because the writing can’t cross the interstices so finally that these conflicting aphorisms, maxims and other verbal authorities are reconciled

That is, he compared and contrasted the fragments he collected to understand how what he read cohered and where disagreement arose (Bacon 1879, 207). Too much study, however, leads to sloth, so he tempered his reading with observation and “learned experience”—“a kind of sagacity”, a “gathering and experimenting with an *instinct* of what might be” (Bacon 1985, 20 (quoted in)).

So, studying must be moderated and combined with experience. It can help perfect our nature, because, “like natural plants”, our natural abilities need pruning or cultivating, yet



must be bounded by practical experience and observation lest they “give forth directions too much at large” (p. 209).

Studies make a person’s character, so specific deficiencies can be remedied with specific fields of study. Bacon suggests that “if a man’s wit be wandering, let him study the mathematics; for in demonstrations, if his wit be called away never so little, he must begin again. .... If he be not apt to beat over matters, and to call up one thing to prove and illustrate another, let him study the lawyers’ cases” (p. 210). Likewise, a person becomes wise through studying history, ingenious through poetry, subtle through mathematics, “deep, moral grave” through natural philosophy, and “able to contend” through logic and rhetoric (ibid.).

In Bacon’s expression, “Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man”, the elements of study are brought together (p. 209). Again, we see activities recommended that compensate for deficiencies in our character. The better memory a person has, the less they need to write; the more ready a person’s mind, the less they need to confer; and the more a person can “seem to know that he doth not”, the less they need to read (ibid.). Reading, therefore, falls out of this trio as always necessary. One of the ways it makes us full must be why Bacon conceptualises it in terms of sustenance, using the verbs “tasted”, “swallowed”, “chewed”, “digested” to describe the use of books: reading satiates us in the sense of providing sufficient nutrition and material with which to work; but reading too much can make us fat. Experience, writing, and conversation put this fuel to use, burring off the excess.

Bacon collected excerpts and quotations from his reading in

commonplace books, the passages therein extracted “from books which were then in every scholar’s hands” (Bacon 1879, 194). It appears that he recorded these “not as he read, but from memory afterwards”, as many are slightly inaccurate, and “was in the habit of sitting down from time to time, reviewing in memory the book he had last read, and jotting down those passages which for some reason or other he wished to fix in his mind” (ibid.). Not only was this useful for his writing but “would in all cases be a good exercise for the memory”, so “may have been practised for that alone” (ibid.).

It’s suggested that Bacon “found the slow and imperfect process of expounding ideas in words to impede too much the free motions of the mind” so instead recorded “brief sentences, picturesque images, or memorable expressions” because they embodied a thought, “such as might serve to represent and recall the entire idea which remained *in puris naturalibus* in his mind” (p. 195). In recording his insights gleaned from reading maxims and aphoristic thought by coining his own, Bacon brought creativity into his reading. He wished (p. 207 (quoted in)):

the seeds of the several arguments to be cast up  
into some brief and acute sentences, not to be  
cited, but to be as skeins or bottoms of thread, to  
be unwinded at large when they come to be used;  
supplying authorities and examples by reference

The attitude with which we should read is “not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider” (Bacon 1985, 209). But not all books are equally useful. Some need only

skimming or occasional reference, some can be substituted for summaries, extracts, and commentaries, some read in their entirety but with no great care, and others carefully studied and analysed (*ibid.*). Or, as Bacon so memorably expressed (*ibid.*):

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

## **Bain, Alexander (1818-1903)**

Bain was a Scottish philosopher and educationist.

The “art of becoming wise through reading”, as opposed to acquiring knowledge in general, he termed study (Bain 1884, 203). To learn a new subject from books we first need a thorough understanding of its foundations. This is traditionally how higher education functions, but differs significantly from how most adults use books for learning.

When we read non-fiction about a new subject we tend to pick works consisting of one-sided discussions, introductory narratives and overviews, and controversial polemics: books that are interesting, pleasurable to read, and not too dense or theoretical. We expect to learn something from this experience, but Bain wants us to consider an alternative approach.

He suggests that we should begin a new subject by selecting “a text-book-in-chief” (pp. 203, 215). This need not be a text-book, per se, but a book with similar properties: a methodical structure, up-to-date, relatively comprehensive without being exhaustive, offering memorable and explanatory illustrations of concepts, and representing the prevailing view of the topic rather than the author’s idiosyncrasies (p. 222). An implication of these criteria is that books with great reputations, or works of genius, may be not be appropriate to begin study (*ibid.*). Further, commencing study with a particularly old book is only sensible if we desire “to work out a subject historically”, and even in this case the proper chronological sequence should be backward not forward (p. 223).

The contrast between how we typically approach subjects and Bain’s suggestion is clear. The book he suggests is not neces-

sarily an easy read or gripping. It requires effort to comprehend, but by making this effort we create a mental schema for the subject: an outline of the subject that our future study can locate new knowledge in, and compare against. Once we have mastered the text-book-in-chief, our reading can widen (p. 218). The more subjective and idiosyncratic works—those that express the author’s personality—and those that are of historical interest or are controversial, can now be read with more profit because we have a basis for comparison. We read more widely now because any single book is insufficient for a course of study. We can’t fully grasp the merits of a book until we compare it with others, and we don’t comprehend a subject “unless we are able to see it stated in various forms, without being distracted or confused” (p. 224).

Whatever we read, though, we know that merely perusing it at an average pace isn’t the best way to learn from it (p. 228). Yet much daily reading is done precisely in this way. Part of the problem is that when reading an expository work without explicit awareness that we’re trying to learn something, we fail to adapt our reading style to suit our purpose. The formatting and style of a textbook instantiates the requisite pedagogical context, but a popular science book, say, is explicitly designed to be read as an enjoyable narrative—the latter may be momentarily diverting, but when read in a recreational mode, is unlikely to stay with us.

We remember better “through the exertion of picking, choosing, and condensing”: active reading (p. 232). It may be useful to memorise key propositions or specific passages, but verbatim copying or memorising without conception of the meaning is senseless (p. 231). Making abstracts is the best method

to improve our comprehension of the material and impress it on our memory: “Any work that deserves thorough study deserves the labour of making an abstract; without which, indeed, the study is not thorough” (pp. 232, 234). Bain’s repeated references to effort and labour serve as a heuristic to evaluate our reading for wisdom: if it’s not effortful, if it’s not slightly laborious, if we aren’t carefully selecting material and expressing it in our words, then we’re not truly studying. Worse, we’re fooling ourselves that we are learning such that we may wrongly come to believe that we understand a subject.

When the structure of the book is logical and well-organised, our abstract can reflect that plan (p. 232). We record the key claims and examples, and use the headings under which the text is arranged to outline the topic and make a synopsis (*ibid.*). For particularly complicated subjects we “make a synopsis of the plan in itself, disentangling it from the applications, for greater clearness” (p. 239). Careful examination of a methodical table of contents yields a comprehensive view of the whole because we learn not only the parts but how they fit together, so develop an idea of how the field is structured (p. 235).

When we read books with a less methodical structure, the best approach for abstracting them may be to identify the agreements and controversies between the current work and the text-book-in-chief, highlighting the weak and strong propositions and examples (p. 233). Identifying these main points may require scanning each paragraph carefully, which by engaging our faculties better serves our memory and leaves us with a better grasp of the author (p. 235).

In abstracting, then, we need to balance two opposing tendencies: to record the author too literally such that we don’t

remember their meaning, and to accommodate the author so much to our way of thinking and writing that we remember not the author but ourselves (*ibid.*). We should aim for the mean.

We're best to proceed slowly through a book, mastering as we go, because the material retains its freshness and interest, and it's more satisfying to know that we're understanding what we read and that having finished the book, we've finished our main task (p. 249). Rereading will still be necessary, but only of passages that we marked as troublesome (pp. 249–250).

Quickly passing from one book to another “is to gain stimulation at the cost of acquisition” (p. 249). We should recognise that reading is fatiguing, and that we get the most from our labour by “the exercise of recalling without the book” as we progress (*ibid.*). Carrying on multiple distinct studies simultaneously is unlikely to be productive; if we need a rest, the alternative should be a recreational not acquisitive activity (p. 248).

To the experienced student there is no such thing as desultory reading; rather, they assume either a severe or easy-going attitude to their books (p. 250). The former is appropriate for systematic works on important subjects: the traditional, effortful mode of active concentration (*ibid.*). The latter is associated with brief pieces, newspapers and periodicals, when we're relaxing (*ibid.*). In this easy-going mode we avoid difficult works and instead absorb interesting fragments of knowledge, rather than aiming at solving specific problems or discussing abstractions (*ibid.*). This kind of reading tends not to provide us with foundations or substantial insight, but may contribute to our knowledge of a field we do have a grounding in, or correct mis-

taken impressions (ibid.).

Ideally, reading is combined with both practical observation of the subject under study and conversing about it (pp. 251–253). Discussing what we have learned with somebody else who’s willing and interested helps us better remember and clarify difficulties that either of us have (p. 253). It provides a break from effortful book learning: each practice enhancing the other (ibid.). We should also attempt original composition to ensure that we understand what we have learned, impress it on our memory, and achieve a concrete result of our study in which we can take pride (p. 254). Following these precepts, Bain suggests, we will, in time become “a self-thinker, and a self-originator” (ibid.).



## **Bayard, Pierre (1954-)**

Bayard is a French professor of literature and a psychoanalyst.

The richness of a novel arises from its incompleteness. Fictional worlds are necessarily incomplete, so as readers we must intervene through our interpretations. A “text is illegible unless the reader gives it final form, for instance by imagining, consciously or unconsciously, innumerable details that are not directly provided” (Motte 2011, 270 (quoted in)). We’re obliged to complete the fictional world.

For example, when Bayard identified a miscarriage of justice in a detective novel, he believed that it needed to be redressed not only in the fictional world but, especially, in the real world, because when we accept it without protest it affects our world by something like contagion (p. 272). We should engage in “detective criticism”: active intervention that does not “merely register the weaknesses of the texts and cast doubt on presumed killers, it dares to pursue its consequences to the end, as it seeks the real killers” (pp. 273–4 (quoted in)). We shouldn’t merely observe a fictional world, but inhabit it, imagine what would result from us intervening in specific ways. Engaging with a text in this way can make us more attentive to scandals in the real world.

Between this fictional world and ours there is an “immense intermediate world” (p. 278 (quoted in)). Bayard’s deeply intuitive approach to interpretation sees “secret passages” between even the most distant texts. Each work is a small part of a universe of universal texts (ibid. (quoted in)):

In a sentence, in the corners of a novelistic structure, in the unexplained gesture of a character, lie

openings that one may take to sneak into another work, or to import therefrom into the one where one resides elements that might enrich it

That we complete the fictional world means that our interpretations are indelibly stamped with our consciousness. No text is independent of our subjectivity: “neutral reading does not exist” (p. 275 (quoted in)). Further, “every literary work represents us unconsciously, or, if you prefer, speaks essentially about us” (ibid. (quoted in)). It contains something of us before we even read it because we belong to its universe. A critical reader strolls through the work, becomes one its characters, and come to terms with themselves.

Viewing fiction in this way leads Bayard to assert the autonomy of fictional characters: “they are not mere paper figures, but living beings who lead an autonomous existence, sometimes going so far as to commit murder unbeknownst to the author” (p. 286). We inhabit their world, and they inhabit ours: the boundary between them is porous, passages traverse it in both directions. Characters are neither wholly controlled by the writer nor the reader, so the fictional world is even more incomplete, and even more difficult to limit in extent. They constantly interpenetrate because both worlds are largely constructed through language (p. 288 (quoted in)):

We must conclude that one cannot distinguish real people and imaginary characters through language, and that consequently the integration of those figures is inevitable, whether one be open-minded or not

Interpretation is legitimated by faithful introspection. When

speaking of books he hasn't read, or "recounting incidents which, strictly speaking, do not occur in them", he articulates (p. 277 (quoted in)):

a subjective truth, describing with the greatest possible accuracy what I saw in them, faithful to myself, and remaining attentive to the moment and the circumstances in which I felt obliged to invoke them

This theme is continued in *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, where Bayard considers cultural literacy. Against these notions of autonomous characters and universal texts, he suggests that it's ambiguous to classify a book as having been read. Rather, there's a continuum between never having heard of a particular book, vaguely skimming it, and performing a close reading (Bayard 2007, xviii). Instead of conceiving the reading of a book in binary terms, he proposes non-mutually-exclusive designations: UB (unknown to you), SB (ones you've skimmed), HB (ones you've heard of), and FB (ones you've forgotten) (ibid.).

This is necessary in part because every act of reading is accompanied by forgetting and misremembering (p. 157). We may remember only fragments, often fused together and inscribed on our memories intertwined with our fantasies, or reduce a book to its metadata or approximate accounts of a few pages (p. 56). Bayard terms "non-reading" as an activity greater than the absence of reading: a stance toward the impossibility of reading all that we want to—accepting that there are too many books to ever read but a fraction (pp. 12–13). Such a reader abstains from reading a particular book in order to grasp how it connects with literature as a whole—its place in our culture's

collective library—out of respect for the book (*ibid.*). This is what we do when we imagine what a book is about without knowing much if anything about it, skim it, or form an opinion based on others' (p. 135).

If we begin to forget what we read almost as we're reading, may not be certain whether we have read a given title, and may have misremembered key elements, to what extent does the act of reading credit us with any particular authority on the book (pp. 47, 55–57, 30)? On the other hand, many books have had a strong influence on us despite us never having read them (p. xvi). Whether or how we have read a book implies neither our knowledge nor ignorance of it.

The activities of reading and discussing books are entirely distinct on this view (p. 113). Indeed, when we consider how we forget what we read, and how our previous experiences and personalities shape our recollections and interpretations this is how it must be: in a conversation ostensibly about a book, “often the various interlocutors will not have read the book they are talking about, or will only have skimmed it, in which case they are each actually talking about a different book”, or even when “each person has held the book in his or her hands and truly knows it, the discussion is less about the book itself than about a fragmentary and reconstituted object” unlikely to overlap with that which other readers have formed (p. 72). Our discussions often focus on the discussions of others about the book, or the book as a symbol or exemplar, rather than the details its text presents (pp. 45–46, 73). In talking about books, then, their content is less important than their connections to, and correlations with, other books (pp. 9, 10). This is the concept of universal texts again: a book's place in our col-

lective library gives it meaning through context, in the same way we infer the meaning of words (p. 117).

Accordingly, reading risks us losing our perspective of literature as a whole—we can only appreciate the true meaning of a book by maintaining a reasonable distance from it (pp. xv, 31). Perhaps skimming books is the most efficient approach to absorb them without getting lost in their details (p. 15)? Being too familiar with a book's content can be inimical to responding creatively or discussing it with others. For discussion, the book is just a pretext, so the more knowledge we require our interlocutor to have of the text, the more awkward and constrained the conversation will be (pp. 162, 156). Normally, this interlocutor will, like us, have few or fragmentary facts on hand, so we risk embarrassing them by requiring either that they admit they haven't met the corresponding cultural touchstone, or that they lie about having done so (p. 126). We should refrain from commenting too precisely about books that arise in conversation and welcome the ambiguities so that they retain all of their potential: "we open up what comes from the book—title, fragment, genuine or fake quotation" (p. 163). In this way "books are replaced by fictions of books" (p. 126).

We subscribe to "the oppressive image of cultural literacy without gaps", and Bayard is passionate about countering our sense of shame or guilt in this context where we are anxious about how our knowledge compares to our interlocutors such that all parties pretend more expansive knowledge than they have; instead he wishes to defend and teach the stance of non-reading (pp. 129, 12–13). We endlessly invent books, so by freeing ourselves of guilt about this, accepting that we

can evaluate a book without reading it, “talking about unread books invites us into a realm of creativity” (pp. 157, xviii–xix, 166).

Our creativity and cultural literacy is threatened by reading too much (p. 178). We risk “vanishing in other people’s books” (p. 25). Following Oscar Wilde, Bayard suggests that “the appropriate time span for reading a book is ten minutes, after which you risk forgetting that the encounter is primarily a pretext for writing your autobiography” (p. 166). In this sense books should be a stimulus, an inspiration to which one responds reflectively—reading to produce oneself. Bayard sees a paradox here: “the path toward ourselves passes through books, but ... this must remain a passage”, so a good reader traverses books knowing that every book is the bearer of part of themselves, and can give them access to this part, if only they’re wise enough not to end their journey there (p. 178).

## **Benjamin, Walter (1892-1940)**

Benjamin was a German philosopher and critic.

Benjamin's essay analysing Goethe's novel, *Elective Affinities*, demonstrated his idiosyncratic approach to reading and criticism. The novel, about the complex relationships of an aristocratic couple, and two people they invite to live with them, resembled the love quadrangle in which Benjamin was involved at the time. This featured a married Benjamin—whose wife was openly in a relationship with his school friend, Erich Schon—and a sculptor who was the subject of Benjamin's unrequited love and also loved Schon (Eilenberger 2020, 143). In reading the novel Benjamin immediately had an interest in better understanding his own situation—he read actively due to being affected by the content, but also because he decided to use the text as an impetus for a critique of bourgeois marriage, and therefore the core of bourgeois society.

That is, he read using his personal circumstances, the fictional framework of the novel, and a desire to meditate and theorise on the problems that arose, to produce an essay which was ostensibly an interpretative criticism, but was actually about everything. It was “an exercise in myth-busting, which reveals all the hidden forces and dynamics that actually hold a modern bourgeois society together, with all its constituent promises of freedom and self-involvement” (p. 144). From this, “he answers the question of how the supposedly free and self-determining subject is to liberate himself from the subtly pernicious effects of these forces and ideas and thus lead a life in which a true and fulfilling marriage might be possible” (ibid.).

Benjamin was able to use the novel in this way by using “allegory and allegorical reading as a tool in a truth-oriented critique of the state of his age”; he couldn’t “express the truth in language in the cultural context to which he is irrevocably confined, but he [could] indicate it” (p. 221). This novel was not merely a springboard for theorising; it provided a language in which he could work. Incidentally, this is also how he often wrote: in *One-Way Street* he presented “thought-pictures” and “recorded situations” which invited his reader “to produce very different, ideally even mutually exclusive, interpretations” (pp. 278–9).

Certainly, most readers don’t have such lofty aims or even attempt to write criticism of what they read. But Benjamin shows that if we read to answer questions about our own lives, not only is our reading far more active, but that through meditating on the experience we may better understand ourselves and others. By considering the specifics of our personal dilemmas, how these map on to a fictional world, then what this means for our peers and our society, we can potentially read our way to broad, creative insights.

Benjamin’s methodology for using books involved this habit of turning “Whatever he did, and whatever he would do, whatever befell him” into a theory, which ennobled it: “revealing it to have been truly relevant and consequential, even a potentially world-saving mode of experience” (p. 102). This is both narcissistic and dazzlingly energetic and creative. It’s a way of reading that, beginning from a self-interested perspective, forces deep engagement with the text, exercises all of our faculties, and potentially concludes in providing succour for others.



He explains this power of narrative by considering the nature of storytelling (Benjamin 2015, 87). Storytelling is the communication of experience whereby the storyteller combines their experiences with those passed down through the oral tradition, to provide counsel for their audience. This counsel is “less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” (p. 86). This is clearly how he experienced Goethe’s novel: it couldn’t answer his specific questions directly, but it could guide him toward continuing the narrative, to ask what comes next. Further, even if Goethe had directly addressed Benjamin’s situation, it still wouldn’t have yielded wisdom for Benjamin, because wisdom comes from us weaving counsel into “the fabric of real life” (ibid.).

Communicated experience is distinct from written information in that information is expected to seem “understandable in itself”, “to sound plausible”, whereas the stories of old “borrowed from the miraculous” (p. 88). Information may sound more exact, but is not necessarily more intelligent than the communicated experience. When a newspaper, say, informs of us an event, it “comes to us...shot through with explanation” (p. 89). Non-fiction and formal writing exemplifies the same principle. Novels tend to force on us “the psychological connection of the events” (ibid.). Texts that polish out all the ambiguity and mystery from what they convey write out their audience: the reader is expected to merely receive. A story, however, demands our interpretation. It is “half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (ibid.).

We gain wisdom from stories because we’re forced to supply

the psychological explanations in a way that makes sense to us (ibid.). They resonate with us because of how they relate to our lives. The timeliness and diverse interpretations of classic, culture-defining wisdom literature, be it scripture and spiritual writing, epic poetry, fables, or fairy tales, still bears this out (p. 101).

These stories are characterised by their enduring through retelling (pp. 91–2). Retelling is not an act of replication, but involves this blending and personalising of others' experiences with ours in such a way that our telling captures something of us. Listening to stories, therefore, is a particularly active process because we attend to the details that matter to us in order to retell our version. We amplify the tale through transformation. If a story is impossible for us to recall exactly—because of its length perhaps—we must concentrate on the most salient details, actively forgetting the rest. Through this assimilation they become memorable to us (p. 90).

But to become wiser in this way requires us to be bored. Boredom is the “apogee of mental relaxation” required for deep assimilation, the “gift of listening” (pp. 90–1):

The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself.

The context for this deep mediation on storytelling was Benjamin's consideration of the novels and short stories of Nikolai Leskov—confirming the productivity of his methodology,

and bringing us back to where we began.

To use books like Benjamin did, we must select those which permit creative, allegorical readings and address our interests and concerns. With the language and imagery they provide, we can view the world in a different way. We can explore how their message can be generalised—how does the story continue? While reading we can ask ourselves how we'd retell this story: how can we share the sentiment without reducing it to mere information? Reading in this way, in a self-forgetting state, filtering the events through our own experiences, makes the story meaningful, memorable, and inspiring.

## **Bloom, Harold (1930-2019)**

Harold Bloom was a humanities professor and prolific literary critic.

He believed that there is no single way to read well, and that the technique is inextricably linked with our motives for doing so (Bloom 2001, 19–20). We should read deeply because it's a healing pleasure, prepares us for change, strengthens the autonomous self, and teaches us our authentic interests (pp. 21–22, 29). Reading helps alleviate our loneliness, because we can't know enough people, yet friendships are liable to diminish (p. 19). The strongest motive "is the search for a difficult pleasure"—a pursuit of the Sublime (p. 29).

Reading is a solitary, selfish endeavour (p. 22). Its pleasures are not social so "there are no ethics of reading" (p. 24). Our reading will not directly benefit others or our community in general, so a principle of Bloom's is that we shouldn't even attempt to improve others in this way through our reading (*ibid.*). There is already insufficient time for the difficult process of self-improvement, to establish and augment your autonomous self, and we can be of little benefit to others until we become ourselves (pp. 24, 195).

The pleasure of reading isn't taught in universities, and how we read depends in part upon our distance from an academic context and culture (p. 22). Bloom exhorts: "clear your mind of academic cant" (p. 23). The jargon and discourse of academic ideologues is inimical to our understanding: "to read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you. You are more than an ideology, whatever your convictions" (p. 28).

These two principles contribute to Bloom's controversial stance on the relationship between the Western canon and social activism (Bloom 1994, 40):

The defense of the Western Canon is in no way a defense of the West or a nationalist enterprise...The greatest enemies of aesthetic and cognitive standards are purported defenders who blather to us about moral and political values in literature. We do not live by the ethics of the Iliad, or by the politics of Plato

Elsewhere Bloom clarifies further (Bloom 2001, 196):

A great novelist...shares with Dickens the power to make us read as if we could be children again. A child in love with reading...will read for the story and the characters and not to expiate social guilt or to reform bad institutions

Even when novels do "address crucial enigmas, or brood upon central questions", we should allow these concerns to reveal and uncover themselves, rather than search for them (ibid.). We can trust the author not to hide vital points.

Again, this is an avowedly selfish and pragmatic approach to reading. Even if we want our reading to improve our neighbour, it can't, so if we read in a community-minded, historicist, or ideological manner, we don't get the full value from literature. Instead, we should develop our autonomous selves; then, we're in a position to benefit our communities.

Bloom follows Emerson in declaring his principle that "a scholar is a candle which the love and desire of all men will

light” (p. 24). This is to confirm that developing as a reader without ethics is not to be unethical or uncaring of others, but rather that “the response to your labours will confirm you as an illumination to others” (ibid.). These labours could take the form of producing scholarship, but also inspiring others and directing them to books that will help them develop these capacities in themselves. We can benefit our peers by encouraging them to read in such a way that strengthens them, aiding their self discovery.

Further following Emerson, Bloom offers the principle that “one must be an inventor to read well”, a “creative reader”. This requires “self-trust” that we develop through much deep reading: a development of an aesthetic confidence.

Imaginary literature requires saving, then, and this requires a revival of an ironic sense (pp. 27, 25). Irony “is only a metaphor, and the irony of one literary age can rarely be the irony of another” (pp. 26–7). If we lose an appreciation of an author’s irony we essentially lose access to their literature: the loss of irony is “the death of reading” (pp. 25–7). Hamlet, for example, “when he says one thing almost invariably means another, frequently indeed the opposite of what he says” (p. 25).

This principle is intertwined with the earlier comments on ideology: as we blinker our reading with such baggage we fail to apprehend this kind of subtle richness, without which certain writers perish (ibid.). Bloom sees “historicized ideology” as making ironic authors like Thomas Mann unavailable (p. 27):

New biographies of him appear, and are reviewed almost always on the basis of his

homoeroticism, as though he can be saved for our interest only if he can be certified as gay, and so gain a place in our curriculum

Unable to appreciate an author's ironic sense we rely on ideologically live attributes of their characters to preserve interest in them.

To appreciate ironic writing "demands a certain attention span, and the ability to sustain antithetical ideas" (ibid.). The need for a renaissance of an ironic sense connects with the prior principles in that "Irony will clear your mind of the cant of the ideologues, and help you to blaze forth as the scholar of one candle" (ibid.).

We should read deeply not to believe, accept, or contradict, books with which we can weigh and consider, that address us as one with the same nature as the author, and teach us how to "share in that one nature that writes and reads" (pp. 27, 29).

## **Calvino, Italo (1923-1985)**

Calvino was an Italian novelist and author of short stories.

“Reading is going toward something that is about to be, and no one yet knows what it will be” (Calvino 1998, 72). The going is different as we age. When we are youths our reading is endowed “with a unique flavour and significance” and can be “literally formative” in supplying exemplars, paradigmatic experiences, scales for comparison and value—many “things which continue to operate in us even when we remember little or nothing about the book” (Calvino 1999, 4). Yet in youth we are also impatient, find it difficult to concentrate, and lack both life experience and skill in reading (*ibid.*). Reading at this stage doesn’t need expertise or patience in order to have a dramatic, yet mostly unacknowledged, effect on our lives.

Classic works in general contain “a particular potency” which can be forgotten yet remain inside us like a seed (*ibid.*). When we reread these books after having matured we “rediscover these constants which by now form part of our inner mechanisms though we have forgotten where they came from” (*ibid.*). For this reason, as adults we should reread the books important to us as youths because, as with all rereadings, even though the book’s the same, the fact that we have changed means we’ll experience the book anew (*ibid.*). Further, our maturity should allow us to appreciate more detail and depth of meaning that our impatient, inexperienced younger selves missed (*ibid.*).

The classics, in this way, provide just as rich an experience the first time we read them when we’re young, as they do when we wait until we’re in a better condition to appreciate



them (ibid.). Their influence comes from how they stick in our memories, imprint themselves on our unconscious, and hide in the collective unconscious—they work on us despite us because we live in a community of which they were foundational. Hence, reading them feels like we’re rereading them, even if this is our first time (p. 5). Great books never exhaust what they have to say (ibid.). They hide in our cultural memory because they leave traces, because they bear “the aura of previous interpretations” (ibid.). Having an image of a classic book through hearsay doesn’t lessen its impact because, by its nature, it must surprise us in being “more original, unexpected, and innovative” when we do read it (pp. 5–6).

Calvino believed that “no book which discusses another book can ever say more than the original book under discussion”, so recommends reading without the aid of secondary literature (p. 5). A classic is a book which “constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off” (p. 6). Even when it doesn’t teach us something new, it reminds us of something old in a fashion that is gratifying by connecting this familiar idea with its source or origin (ibid.).

There must be a “spark” for a classic to work as a classic, to establish “a personal relationship with the reader” (ibid.). It’s pointless to read out of a sense of duty, a feeling of respect, or a belief that the book is useful in some specific way; “we should only read them for love” (ibid.). They should be read simply because “reading the classics is always better than not reading them” (p. 9).

Through these personal relationships we come to recognise

our “own classics” (p. 6). In a lofty sense “‘your’ book” is “any book which comes to represent the whole universe, a book on a par with ancient talismans” (ibid.). Or, more typically, “a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it” (p. 7). That is to say, you need not agree with an author or enjoy their argument for a book to have a meaningful impact on you.

To read classic books “you have to establish where exactly you are reading them ‘from’”, you need a sense of the contemporary context, “otherwise both the reader and the text tend to drift in a timeless haze” (p. 8) Our present time is “always the context in which we have to place ourselves to look either backwards or forwards”, so it’s not desirable to entirely eschew contemporary literature (ibid.). Instead, Calvino suggests that the reader “skilfully alternates classic readings with calibrated doses of contemporary material” (ibid.).

We should each “invent our own ideal library of our classics” (p. 9). Approximately half should consist of books that we’ve read and found meaningful, and half should be titles which we want to read because we think may be meaningful; plus, there should be a “section of empty spaces for surprises and chance discoveries” (ibid.).

In his novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, Calvino cautions the reader entering a bookstore (Calvino 1998, 5):

You have forced your way through the shop  
past the thick barricade of Books You Haven’t  
Read, which were frowning at you from the  
tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you

know you must never allow yourself to be awed,  
that among them there extend for acres and  
acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books  
Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books  
Read Even Before You Open Them Since They  
Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before  
Being Written.

He “reminds us that any choice one makes of what to read is made against a backdrop of deep and humbling ignorance, and that any attempt to call a book the best or the worst book one has read this month, this year, or in this lifetime requires a necessary self-deception regarding one’s own knowledge of literature” (Emre 2023).

## **Carlyle, Thomas (1795-1881)**

Carlyle was a Scottish essayist, philosopher, and historian.

In an address he gave at Edinburgh University, Carlyle exhorted the students that they had an imperative duty to be assiduous in their reading, warning that this is harder than it sounds (Carlyle 1866, 12). Good readers are discriminating, faithful, attentive, and engage with a variety of texts in which they have a real interest and that complement the subjects with which they're engaged (*ibid.*).

We can be tempted to consume “toothsome” and unwholesome foods, so analogously, reading with discrimination involves distinguishing between a “false appetite and true” (p. 13). We should identify which books we truly have an appetite for, and that are also suitable for our constitution, while also considering the advice of experts (*ibid.*). When unsure what to read, we should choose a title about which we're particularly curious, because our interest is the best indicator that we will benefit from the book (*ibid.*).

In distinguishing between good and bad books, we should be aware that its “safer and better for many a reader” that they have nothing to do with books—such a reader may even be harmed (p. 25). That is, there may be a negative consequence to reading poorly, and reading bad books; not simply that it wastes our time. There are, however, a few, but sufficient to occupy all of our reading time, “written by a supremely noble kind of people” (pp. 25–6). Elsewhere, Carlyle suggests that if we value our time, we should only read what will improve by repeated readings (Carlyle 1885, 105). We must be conscientious and vigilant in selecting reading material because “books

are like men's souls; divided into sheep and goats" (Carlyle 1866, 26):

Some few are going up, and carrying us up, heavenward; calculated, I mean, to be of priceless advantage in teaching,—in forwarding the teaching of all generations. Others, a frightful multitude, are going down, down; doing ever the more and the wider and the wilder mischief.

In a discussion of a poem by Goethe, Carlyle expands on a particular kind of reading: "in all expositions of fact and argument, clearness and ready comprehensibility are a great, often an indispensable object", yet "the grand point is to *have* a meaning, a genuine deep, and noble one; the proper form for embodying this...will gather round it almost of its own accord" (Carlyle 1885, 103). So a poetical work, for example, "by no means carries its significance written on its forehead...it is enveloped in a certain mystery", which hasty readers are liable to miss (p. 102).

This style of composition may first seem impenetrable but we come to "love it the more for the labour it has given us; we almost feel as if we ourselves had assisted in its creation" (p. 104). To truly read an author is to see their object as they saw it, so to judge their work we need to understand its context, the circumstances in which it felt true to them, or that persuaded them to write (ibid.). This requires mounting "that Hill of Vision where the poet stood", which is satisfying in that it is effortful and active: a doing rather than a mere gaining (p. 105). Indeed, reading contents and profits us by "what we are made to *give*" (ibid.). By studying an author to their "minutest meanings" is to think as they thought, see with their eyes, and

partly capture their rich mood and feeling (pp. 105–6).

The object of one's studies and reading is not particular, technical knowledge, but the acquisition of wisdom (Carlyle 1866, 26). This is "sound appreciation and just decision as to all the objects that come round you, and the habit of behaving with justice, candour, clear insight, and loyal adherence to fact" (ibid.). Such wisdom is our greatest achievement (ibid.).

## Carroll, Lewis (1832-1898)

Carroll was an author, poet, and scholar.

Life depends on the body being fed, so Nature ensures that we experience discomfort and pain when we eschew meals or eat the wrong things, and tasks such as digestion and circulation are done automatically. A neglect of the mind, however, is far less noticeable, so Carroll suggests we translate some of the rules for eating and drinking into corresponding ones for the mind (Carroll 1907, 17–18).

Finding certain foods disagreeable or causing indigestion we learn to refuse them in future, but we're slower to learn "how indigestible some of our favourite lines of reading are" (pp. 19–20). This is seen in the after-effects of reading unwholesome novels: low mood, lethargy, and existential weariness (p. 19). The "mental gluttony" of reading too much can lead to "weakness of digestive power, and in some cases to a loss of appetite" (p. 20). We should provide our minds with the proper kind of food in the proper quantity (pp. 19–20).

A thirsty person may appreciate "a quart of beer", but not "a tray containing a little mug of beer, a little mug of cider, another of cold tea, one of hot tea, one of coffee, one of cocoa...", even if the same amount of liquid was provided (pp. 21–22). We must not consume "*too many kinds at once*" of this wholesome mental food (p. 21).

Our body requires that we rest at least three hours between meals, and while the mind requires a rest, too, the minimum interval is much shorter (p. 23). If we have to devote hours to one particular subject we should take a break every hour wherein we turn our mind to completely differently subjects,

throwing it “out of gear” for about five minutes (pp. 22–24). Or, to continue the metaphor: “we should be careful to allow *proper intervals* between meal and meal, and not swallow the food hastily without mastication, so that it may be thoroughly digested” (p. 22).

The mental process corresponding to mastication and digestion is “simply *thinking over* what we read” (p. 24). This cognitive exertion is much more difficult than passively “taking in the contents of our Author”, so we’re apt to neglect it (ibid.). Carroll suggests: “One hour of steady thinking over a subject (a solitary walk is as good an opportunity for the process as any other) is worth two or three of reading only” (p. 25). This mental digestion arranges our new knowledge into coherent bundles and tickets them so we can readily locate them in future (p. 28). If we skip this step we may believe that we know something, because we remember reading it, but when pressed, find that we can’t answer basic questions about the material (Carroll 1907, pp 26-8). Carroll concludes his analogy: “it is one’s duty no less than one’s interest to ‘read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest’ the good books that fall in your way” (pp. 30–1).

In an introduction to *Symbolic Logic* (Carroll 1958, xv–xvii) Carroll provides suggestions for reading in general, with a focus on non-fiction. We should read from the beginning of the book rather than dipping in and out because for many kinds of books, especially scientific texts, the latter material will be unintelligible if read out of order (pp. xv–xvi).

Likewise, we should ensure that we thoroughly understand what we have read so far before beginning a new chapter or section, first completing any exercises or problems that were



set (Carroll 1907, xvi). Otherwise we're liable to become more and more puzzled and eventually frustrated enough to discard the book (*ibid.*). A passage not immediately understandable should be reread up to three times, and if this doesn't suffice we're likely mentally fatigued (*ibid.*). In this case, turn to another task, and take the book up again the next day, at which point it will likely be more comprehensible (*ibid.*). Talking over difficult material with others or even aloud to oneself is a "wonderful smoother-over of difficulties": we can explain things so clearly to ourselves (*ibid.*).

Carroll was described as regarding "dutiful reading the business of life", driven to read "quickly, effectively, even continuously" (Wakely-Mulroney, 185). For Carroll "reading has a distinct moral purpose", and what we read should be "guided by the shortness of human life rather than subjective factors such as taste or mood" (p. 206). There was a palpable anxiety surrounding the vast amount of text that he wanted to read and the limited time he had available.

On this view reading was "primarily as an exercise in textual storage and retrieval": being able to recall the contents of a book when it's no longer in your possession (p. 189). To this end, he recommended "memorisation as an alternative mode of textual engagement", and often experimented with systems that would enable him to read faster and recall what he read more accurately (pp. 185–6). These connections between systems of memorisation, "reading as a source of mental improvement", and the effective use of time, dominated his thought: his "diaries contain not only lists of books to read but also "things to be learned by heart," such as poems, historical chronologies, mathematical formulae, and geometrical

problems” (p. 195). He felt that “mnemonic repetition” was a mindful process with “the capacity to furnish meaning, whether by awakening new associations or refreshing and affirming preexisting ones” (p. 197). The ability to read from memory equips the reader “with passages that may be repeated during “the many occasions when reading is difficult, if not impossible” (p. 194). By separating a book’s form from its content in this way we may “transcend problems relating to the accessibility of print and the temporality of reading” (ibid.).

Wakely-Mulroney saw Carroll as advocating “two potentially oppositional modes of textual engagement: intent perusal designed to acquire information securely, with minimum wasted effort or time, and a comparatively meditative practice in which works are scanned or rehearsed perpetually, whether to reify their contents or recalibrate the mind itself” (p. 207).

## Collingwood, R. G. (1889-1943)

Collingwood was an English philosopher, historian, and archaeologist.

He was reading his father's books and learning Latin and Greek by age six (Collingwood 1939, 1). When he encountered a translation of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* aged eight he felt intensely excited that the topics were "things which at all costs I must understand" (p. 3). Indignant, he "felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own...as if a veil had been lifted up and my destiny revealed" (pp. 3-4).

Before becoming a philosophy professor at Oxford he spent almost his whole teaching life showing how to best read philosophical texts (p. 74). This was a distinctly different process to teaching how to criticise a doctrine—his colleagues attended to that (p. 27). The principles he developed aren't specific to philosophy, though; from his practical advice to his students arose a theory of hermeneutics. His discoveries exemplified his methodology.

The first rule he suggested was: "never accept criticism of any author before satisfying yourself of its relevance" (p. 74). He taught his pupils that before they accepted criticism of a philosopher's work they must first establish, by first-hand study, that the philosophy being criticised is what the philosopher actually expounded. They must defer their criticism until they were certain of this, and "if the postponement was *sine die* it did not greatly matter" (p. 27).

This was a response to philosophers who refuted others, or who parroted such refutations, without having understood the text in question. When a pupil asked about a refutation on Kant, say, he'd "reach for a book with the words 'Let us see whether this is what Kant really said'" (ibid.). Not only was this approach better scholarship but it also excited the student who had "been merely repelled by ready-made refutations of a doctrine" (p. 75). We become more active and engaged readers when we return to the sources and observe what the author under dispute was really trying to say.

The information in text-books, by contrast, was "that putrefying corpse of historical thought" (ibid.). This perspective can be partly traced to his childhood when, in reading a compendium of Descartes' *Principia* at approximately age nine, he learned (p. 2):

the secret which modern books had been keeping from me, that the natural sciences have a history of their own, and that the doctrines they teach on any given subject, at any given time, have been reached not by some discoverer penetrating to the truth after ages of error, but by the gradual modification of doctrines previously held

That is, when secondary literature presents a modern interpretation of a particular doctrine or domain it erases its historicity by presenting a snapshot of ongoing historical progress as fact. Relying on secondary glosses not only deprives us of the context and colour of the original ideas, but also obscures the process by which the current consensus arose. Learning how ideas develop over time can motivate us to do our own original

work, showing how the experts of our day read their peers, and therefore how we can read to the same end. Repeatedly returning to original texts in this way was beneficial to Collingwood, as well as his students (p. 75):

I would return to a passage whose meaning I thought I knew—had it not been expounded by numerous learned commentators, and were they not more or less agreed about it?—to find that, under this fresh scrutiny, the old interpretation melted away and some quite different meaning began to take form

His second rule was: “never think you understand any statement made by a philosopher until you have decided with the utmost possible accuracy, what the question is to which he means to answer” (p. 74). You can’t understand what an author means just by studying their statements, even if they’re perfectly truthful and expertly expressed (p. 31). In order to find out what they meant you must also know what question they were answering—a question in their mind, which they presumed to be in yours (*ibid.*).

A logical proposition “could not be the right answer to any question which might have been answered otherwise”; a “highly detailed and particularized proposition must be the answer” to a question equally detailed and particular. So, if the question we identify is vague and generalized, we need to reevaluate (pp. 31–32). Put another way, we will mistake the meaning of a proposition unless we correctly identify the question to which it is a response<sup>3</sup> (Collingwood 1939, 33).

---

<sup>3</sup>This “logic of question and answer” was influential on, yet criticised

It is a historical question to ask: “To what question did So-and-so intend this proposition for an answer?”, and therefore must be resolved with recourse to historical methods (p. 39). Tackling such questions requires you “to see what the different people concerned were trying to do...looking at the situation through their eyes, and thinking for yourself whether the way in which they tackled it was the right way” (p. 58). If you can grasp a philosopher’s questions, you can understand their doctrines (p. 61).

This is difficult because good writers answer the questions that their contemporaries are interested in, and rarely state the questions explicitly. When the writer becomes canonised, and their contemporaries die, the question is forgotten, “especially if the answer he gave was generally acknowledged to be the right answer; for in that case people stopped asking the question” (p. 39).

So, when faced with a difficult passage of philosophy—or similar classical text—we can assume that the author, who is “neither illiterate or idiotic”, has expressed a thought they thought worth expressing (p. 71). Initially, this may seem incomprehensible, but if we further assume that they are answering a precise question, our challenge is to determine this question. A poor reader, instead, assumes that the question is one of which they are vaguely reminded by the passage (ibid.).

Collingwood describes himself as a “slow and painful thinker”

---

by Gadamer. The point of contention was that Collingwood believed it possible to “rethink the same thought”—“re-enacting” the thought of the author—whereas Gadamer saw it “as a mistake to conceive of ‘understanding’” as trying to “recover an...author’s intention” (*Interpreting R. G. Collingwood* 2025).

who found it difficult to learn from books (pp. 107, 89). The philosophical ideas he summarises in his autobiography “were being worked out for nearly twenty years”: “repeatedly written down, corrected, and rewritten”, but not for publication (p. 116). Rather, “whenever I had a cub to lick into shape, my pen is the only tongue I have found useful” (p. 124). This “long and oppressive period of gestation” in which he learned from what he read required “historical research and reflection” and extensive writing (p. 107).

By repeatedly returning to primary sources, assuring ourselves that we have derived the precise questions that the author is answering through contemplation and studying the author’s historical context, then confirming our understanding by writing and re-writing, we can move from regurgitating secondary sources to profitable, original readings.

## **Davies, Robertson (1913-1995)**

Davies was a Canadian author and professor.

He confessed to having been “a rake at reading” (Davies 1998, 2–3):

I have read those things which I ought not to have read, and I have not read those things which I ought to have read, and there is no health in me—if by health you mean an inclusive and coherent knowledge of any body of great literature. I can only protest, like all rakes in their shameful senescence, that I have had a good time

Even as rakish readers we shouldn’t be content with a steady diet of mediocre books; but neither should we read only the best: to know what a masterpiece is we must occasionally read the substandard to gauge our current age (pp. 215, 233).

We call some books masterpieces because we admit that literature, like music, is art. When we listen to music “our civilization demands that serious and sometimes almost religious attention be paid to it”, but when we read, many of us skip, stop “in improbable places”, and rush through books, just so that we can say we read them (pp. 221–2). Instead, we should put aside time—even just fifteen minutes—in which we read with our full attention (p. 223). During this serious reading time we should only read what we like; putting aside anything that bores us (*ibid.*). Davies exemplified these principles. He read for most of each day in a windowless office, and did some reading for his book reviews at night; when he was tired of work, he read for pleasure (p. 17). He read an “incoherent mass



of books”, “wanderingly, capriciously”, following his nose (p. 26).

Yet he read slowly, ranking “only slightly above those who move their lips and follow the lines with a careful finger” (p. 17). We’re trying to find out what the book has to say, not reach the end in order to read something else, so we should read “somewhat more slowly than modern educationists recommend” (p. 223). Davies describes this pace as that which “you can pronounce and hear every word in your own head” (ibid.). This eloquent verbalisation takes more time, but we diminish our pleasure by trying to save time in this regard, and our pleasure is why we read (ibid.).

Verbalising as we read used to be common and allowed readers to truly absorb and remember what they read (p. 224). It is also a useful critical practice in that when encountering a dubious or false passage, the “trick of argument or the falsity of emphasis will declare itself to your ear, when it seemed to be deceiving your eye” (ibid.). We don’t get the best from our reading unless we recognise and develop our qualities as interpretative artists (pp. 224–5):

You do not play a Bach concerto for the solo cello  
on a musical saw, and you should not read a play  
of Shakespeare in the voice of an auctioneer selling tobacco

Pleasure is our purpose so we should read several books at once—the “notion that you have to read solemnly through one book before you can allow yourself to take up another is simple Puritanism” (p. 226). To be an epicurean reader like Davies we should keep on our table “a book of poetry, as well

as a novel, some essays, and perhaps a play or two” so that we have to hand what is appropriate to our appetite (ibid.).

As our appetites and personalities change in our maturity, so do our experiences of books. It is a sin to assume that having read something once we have read it forever (p. 228). We should especially aim to read literature at the age the author was when they wrote it, and then reread it periodically to evaluate how their work comports with our life experience (ibid.). Indeed, we should seek awareness of the author’s mind so that we can share it and learn from it (pp. 229–230). We never read the same book twice, and even when we read a book for the first time, we make something fresh of it (pp. 228, 26):

A book is renewed every time it finds a perceptive reader, and no book is the same to every reader

Reading is a reflection of the reader’s spirit, so while we may appear to choose our books, our books also choose us (p. 26):

Reading is not escape, something done at random; it is directed unerringly toward the inner target. It is truly a turning inward. It is exploration, extension, and reflection of one’s innermost self. If I have been a rake at reading, the caprice has been to the outward eye alone. The inward spirit, I am convinced, knew very well what it was doing.

Books that find, and are found by, us help “enlarge and complete us” (ibid.). They do this in part by cultivating our power of feeling and sympathy to establish “the very fabric and atmosphere in which life is lived and from which it is perceived” (p. 221). Reading is the most convenient way to educate our

feelings (p. 26).

Davies calls on readers like him—“those who read for pleasure, but not for idleness; who read for pastime but not to kill time; who love books but do not live by books”—to recognise themselves as a “clerisy” (p. 234):

the clerisy do not want to take anything from anybody; they merely want to recover what was their own in those distant days before so much of our intellectual life was abandoned to the universities. They want to have a say in the world of books. They want the world of books, through them, to have its influence in the national life - social and political.

## **D'Israeli, Issac (1766-1848)**

D'Israeli was a British writer and scholar.

In order to receive ideas from books we must exhibit a “just taste”: an open yet critical mind, a “happy discrimination” (D'Israeli 1796, 189–190). Yet the correct aim of reading is erudition, for which taste is insufficient. To understand and remember the author's ideas, find awakened in ourselves new sentiments, and become familiar with the author's manner, taste must be combined with a particular mental labour (pp. 189–194).

Readers of taste read for pleasant distraction, obtaining fleeting pleasure, at best, or “tumultuous sensation” (p. 190). Such readers only desire to partake in sentiment and fantastic imagery. These transient perceptions are quickly forgotten because they aren't formed into ideas (*ibid.*). These readers aren't necessarily aware that they take this approach or its consequences: they “complain that their memory is defective, and their studies unfruitful” (p. 191). Such readers must be content to remain on the “paths of cultured pleasure grounds”; reading widely would be experienced as painful and interminable (p. 194).

This is not a criticism of reading fiction; a “professional student”, for example, will primarily read literature profitable to their career or primary interest, but diversify this with recreational reading (p. 203). Rather, D'Israeli wants us to consider the approach we take to any text, especially if we're unable to remember or truly engage with what we read.

When we read with erudition we pair our just taste with the habitual and effortful mental exertion in an “art of

combination". We actively reason about what we read so that the ideas which arise become treasured and available to our mind "arranged as materials for reflection" (pp. 190–1). That this labour is fatiguing means that the reader "who only seeks for information, must be contented to pick it up in obscure paths, to mount rugged rocks for a few flowers, and to pass many days bewildered in dark forests, and wild deserts" (pp. 193–4). Reading for erudition requires "that phlegmatic perseverance which seems to find pleasure in mere study"; when we experience temporary disinclination to focus on our reading, we need to employ self-discipline. Commitment to this task leads to the mind assimilating the material with an awakened curiosity (pp. 193–200). Reading to learn, then, is difficult and gruelling, but unlike the reader of taste, readers of erudition find their studies fruitful.

Understanding this activity as labour suggests that reading certain books can be unnecessary labour. To study some books it can be sufficient to grasp their outline and general thrust, and examine some key passages, rather than reading them in their entirety (p. 195). Even eminent thinkers are keen index-readers because this reveals more of a book's secrets than if they had read through the book methodically (pp. 195–6). The index lays "open the nerves and arteries of a book" (p. 196). Similarly, "the appropriation of posterity" may lay open the oeuvres of celebrated authors because "the best writers, when they are voluminous, have a great deal of mediocrity": by waiting for critical opinion to settle on an author we can avoid their less important work (pp. 197–8).

Valuable truths are contained in both old and new books, so it's a mistake to read only one kind to the exclusion of the other

(p. 207). We're also wrong to read the author instead of the book because in this way even the "most ingenious author may be injured by the most impertinent reader": we suffer if we avoid a book purely because of our acquaintance with the author (ibid.).

A critical judgement of a book should be suspended until well after our first reading because, as with wine, "the first glass is insufficient to decide on its quality" (p. 201). We must savour and reflect before we judge. For a book to please a reader requires effort on behalf of the reader as well as the author. Not only must we employ just taste and active reasoning but bring our "literary appetite"—"which the author can no more impart, than the most skilful cook can give an appetency to the guests" (p. 198). Otherwise, our mood or "infirm dispositions" may lead us to judge the book unfavourably (p. 199).

By focusing on mental labour, D'Israeli describes how the reader must bring to their author certain qualities in order to both understand and remember the work, but also fairly judge it. If we shirk this labour we must realise that we will only obtain temporary enjoyment, and form few memories, of what we read.

## Eco, Umberto (1932-2016)

Umberto Eco was an Italian philosophy professor and author of both academic works and bestselling novels.

A text, he suggested, “is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work”, generating “a variety of possible conclusions without its author’s ordaining and limiting them in advance” (Eco 1988, 216; Eco 2004a, 3). It should be used “as a generator of intellectual stimulation”, “a machine for thinking” because it can say things of which the writer was unaware—their intentions don’t bound the meaning of the work (Eco 1988, 216). Yet its possible interpretations are not indefinite (Eco 1981, 81). Rather, literary interpretation is a game each generation plays wherein we are encouraged to experience a freedom of interpretation because texts “offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life” (Eco 2004b, 4–5).

A rule of this game is that we profoundly respect the intention of the text (*ibid.*). Texts “flag with supreme authority what we are to take as important in them, and what we must *not* take as a point of departure for freewheeling interpretations” (p. 5). There are facts which the reading community endorses, e.g. “that Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street, and that Clark Kent is the same person as Superman” (pp. 9–10). Further, “the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader” by requiring us to confirm our hypotheses against the text as a whole (Eco 1990, 59). Interpreting literature is maximally free yet governed by a means to determine bad evaluations that disregard commonly accepted facts or are contradicted by the text as a whole.

The original jacket of his novel *The Name of the Rose* (The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel 2003, 176–177):

listed three categories of readers (ideal Model Readers) Eco envisioned for the work: readers interested in the complex plot; readers attracted by the history of ideas who might see connections between the cold war of the twentieth century and the theological debates in the book; and readers aware of the fact that the novel was a palimpsest of other works, a “whodunit” of quotations, as Eco puts it

He conceived an integral part of the writing process to be foreseeing these model readers: envisaging the groups who will have sufficient “encyclopedic competence”, or background knowledge, to interpret the text in the same way it was written (Eco 1979, 7). Perhaps, then, we should consider what our authors expect of us, how to better fit their model, or whether other works would suit us better?

A well-organised text both presupposes such competence coming from outside the text, and works to build it up by textual means (p. 8). We acquire this competence in part because of intertextuality: “not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves” (Eco 2014b, 306). Texts cannot be read independently of our other experiences or ideological perspectives (Eco 1979, 22). This helps explain how rereading a text, especially having read another text in the interim, can result in a new interpretation for the same reader.

In *The Name of the Rose* a critical approach to reading is



recommended: “Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn’t ask ourselves what it says but what it means” (Eco 2014b, 338). Eco makes a similar point in describing bad readers (Eco 2014a, 260):

What happens to those readers who are totally incapable of distinguishing between fiction and reality? Their response produces no aesthetic effects, because they are so busy taking the story seriously they don’t ask whether it’s told well or badly, they make no attempt to learn from it, and they fail to identify with the characters. They simply exhibit what I would call a fictional deficit; they are unable to suspend disbelief.

Eco’s personal library contained thirty thousand books. Yet, this quantity of titles does not constitute “an ego-boosting appendage but a research tool” (Taleb 2007, 1). Eco’s philosophy is glossed as “Read books are far less valuable than unread ones” (ibid.). The more that you know, the larger your collection should be of what you don’t know. Taleb figures Eco as an “antischolar—someone who focuses on the unread books, and makes an attempt not to treat his knowledge as a treasure, or even a possession, or even a self-esteem enhancement device—a skeptical empiricist” (p. 2).

You respect books by using them, by annotating them (Eco 2015, 125–126). If you own a book, and it’s not an antique, your underlines and annotations “become traces of your interest. They allow you to return to the book even after a long period, and find at a glance what originally interested you” (p. 124). Eco made these remarks in the context of writing

academic theses, and in this vein suggested we use note-cards to record: bibliographic information of books we've read and want to read, quotations linked to the corresponding bibliographic card, and connections between concepts and quotations (pp. 115–142). This sounds excessive for the average reader, but Eco's heavy use of allusions and obscure intertextual references in his fiction suggests that he took this approach, especially the use of quotation and connection cards, outside of his academic work. In *Foucault's Pendulum* the narrator writes (Eco 1989, 225):

I had cross-referenced index cards. ... No piece of information is superior to any other. Power lies in having them all on file and then finding the connections. There are always connections; you have only to want to find them.

If we invest the time to formalise our reading in this way, we're able to consume books disorderly: it allowed Eco to "meander, alternating his objectives, provided that a thick web of personal notes, possibly in the form of index cards, keeps track of these "adventurous" wanderings" (Eco 2015, 104).

## Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1803-1882)

Emerson was a poet, essayist, and lecturer.

Books for him were often stimuli, inspirations for thought. He counselled: “Do not attempt to be a great reader, and read for facts and not by the bookful” (Woodbury 1974). This involved what we’d now term *skimming*: “learn to divine books, to *feel* those that you want without wasting much time over them” (p. 27). We should develop a taste and techniques for evaluating the usefulness of a book (pp. 27–8):

The glance reveals when the gaze obscures.  
Somewhere the author has hidden his message.  
Find it, and skip the paragraphs that do not talk  
to you.

The book becomes not a text to read from beginning to end, but a collection of ideas from which we must locate those that are meaningful for our purposes. Often, one chapter is sufficient (p. 27).

This method of divination includes learning “how to tell from the beginnings of the chapters and from glimpses of the sentences whether you need to read them entirely through” (p. 28). To evaluate books efficiently we can page through them relatively swiftly, “keeping the writer’s thought before you”, until we have found what we were searching for; then, reading slowly, dwelling with the author (*ibid.*). We should read only to start our “own team”; books are a tool, a prompt (*ibid.*).

Elsewhere he glossed this idea as: “Books are for the scholar’s idle times” (Emerson 2015, 96). When we’re inspired or find an insight, we should put the book aside because reading is

not an end in itself. But Emerson goes further, advising us to stop reading if we find ourselves becoming absorbed in the text: “Reading long at one time anything, no matter how it fascinates, destroys thought as completely as the inflections forced by external causes” (Woodbury 1974, 29–30). We should remain at a distance from the text, watching for our impressions. Otherwise we “accumulate dreams” instead of facts (*ibid.*). (Emerson cared little for fiction).

To read well we must be inventors (Emerson 2015, 97):

There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labour and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.

This is an effortful yet artistic stance where the text gives free rein to our imaginations, but like creative writing it is a skill that we need to develop.

As for what to books to study, we should read authors “who are not lazy; who put themselves into contact with the realities” (Woodbury 1974, 25). Emerson appreciated religious texts and travel writing where the writer expressed their actual experiences. By reading authors “who wrote about facts from a new point of view”, we become familiar with the author’s “atmosphere”: it’s unimportant if their facts are ultimately wrong, or if they err in their reasoning. The reading of original, first person accounts is invigorating and instructs us in observation (p. 26). We learn to perceive more astutely what we experience in life and in books. We can hone this ability by

describing what we see when we travel ourselves (p. 25).

Emerson favoured original works on the basis that for a work to be preserved it must be good, so it's a better use of time to read the old and famed (Emerson 1912, 195). Contemporary works are harder to judge because "it is not so easy to distinguish betwixt notoriety and fame" (p. 196). He was comfortable reading classics in translation, though, on the belief that "What is really best in any book is translatable, — any real insight or broad human sentiment" (pp. 203–4). He suggested avoiding the reading of "what you shall learn, without asking, in the street and the train"—the opposite of the classic (p. 196). Further, he advised against "all second-hand borrowing books"—compilations, anthologies, collections of excerpts and quotations—because nobody "can select the beautiful passages of another for you" (Woodbury 1974, 27).

Reading and writing were inextricably linked for Emerson. His "organized, persistent, purposeful journal keeping is one of the most striking aspects of his early intellectual life" (Richardson Jr. 1995, 42). His biographer explains (*ibid.*):

He wrote constantly, he wrote about everything, he covered hundreds of pages. When he had nothing to say, he wrote about having nothing to say. He read and indexed and reread what he had written

In college Emerson began keeping journals to list books he'd read, quotations from his reading, and his reflections that these readings inspired (pp. 41–2). His use of journals shows how he assimilated what he read, remembering what he found important, and derived from it original thought. To some

extent, his writing is the reason he read.

These journals left out “the chaff and dross of daily routine and dull reading”, so moved from one great highlight or notable quotation to the next (Richardson Jr. 1995, pp. pp. 320). Such a journal “converts the heights you have reached into table land” (p. 320). The best of his day’s reading and thought was recorded in his journal, and the best of his journals were transformed into his essays (ibid.).

Emerson discouraged study proceeding from curricula or detailed plans: “The best rule of reading will be a method from nature, and not a mechanical one of hours and pages” (Emerson 1912, 194). This helps us pursue our purpose, instead of reading miscellaneous works in a desultory fashion: study should be driven by the pilot of our genius, by the books that are proper specifically to us (ibid.). This way whether we read one book or many we will read advantageously (ibid.). This exemplifies Emerson’s notion of trusting our own nature and following our passionate curiosity, and reflects his understanding that learning in this way is fruitful because we remember the material that engages us.

He offered three practical rules for reading (p. 196):

1. Never read any book that is not a year old.
2. Never read any but famed books.
3. Never read any but what you like.

## **Fanon, Frantz (1925-1961)**

Fanon was a psychiatrist and political philosopher from Martinique.

He was a polymath who “plunged himself into an extensive and phenomenal reading programme” encompassing “literature, political economics, medicine and philosophy”, but was “no armchair philosopher or academic theorist” (Fanon 2008, xi; Fanon 2016, 11). His work emerged directly from the “crucible of colonial experience” and was “put into practice, and used to aid the anti-colonial struggle” (Fanon 2008, xviii).

Having read psychiatry at university in France, Fanon struggled when he sought to apply these theories in his psychiatric practice in Algeria. He learned that Western sociotherapy failed because it “disregarded...neglected geographic, historical, cultural, and social particularities [of] mentally ill Muslim men” (Cherki 2006, 69). The theories of his field were implicitly those of the coloniser, so when a patients’ suffering did not conform to the colonizer’s established, often ethnocentric, medical frameworks, it was often invalidated or ignored. Fanon fought against this situation by engaging directly with his minority patients, by tirelessly questioning Arab nurses, and actively seeking to understand Algerian customs and values (p. 72). By exploring and conversing with the population, learning from the failures of culturally inappropriate interventions, he demonstrated his conviction that “psychopathological expression is grounded in cultural forms” (p. 34). Even ostensibly neutral scientific theories can function as tools of oppression and epistemic violence when detached from concrete, lived experience: they inevitably lead to misdiagnosis, misunderstanding, and ultimately,

dehumanisation. In reading we must recognise the inherent limits of abstract, decontextualised knowledge and be willing to learn directly from those whose realities are being studied, prioritising their concerns.

This insistence on practical, embodied application of abstract knowledge dominated Fanon's political thinking, too: "What matters is not to know the world but to change it" (Fanon 2008, 8). He viewed intellectuals who prioritise detail and "specialized areas and fields" over the "overall picture" of the people's revolution as "vulgar opportunist[s]" who tend "to lose sight of the unity of the movement" (Fanon 2004, 13–14). Literature is "a jumble of dead words" when it has "nothing in common with the real-life struggle in which the people are engaged" (p. 11). For the colonized, "violence represents the absolute praxis" which "enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end" (p. 44). Books are weapons. It is in inspiring and informing practical action that the text becomes most useful, and there is a continuous, reciprocal relationship between action and understanding: action informs understanding, and understanding, in turn, refines action. Reading must be deeply integrated into action, which for Fanon was the "urgent and pressing thing on his mind: liberation" (Fanon 2008, xi).

Liberation, revolution is the "true culture": "it is forged while the iron is hot" (Fanon 2004, xlvii). Culture "never has the translucency of custom"; it is "the very opposite of custom, which is always a deterioration of culture" (p. 160). That is, "seeking to stick to tradition or reviving neglected traditions is not only going against history, but against one's people" (ibid.). If tradition works in this way, reading ancient



texts and seeking to directly apply their lessons risks retarding the cultural progress of a revolutionary culture. Historical texts or ethnographic studies are not merely records of the past but potential catalysts for future action and transformation.

Revolutionary “action does not follow automatically from understanding or theorizing. Action requires aspiration and desire.” (Fanon 2008, xvii). Reading should cultivate not only intellectual comprehension but also the moral will, desire, and aspiration for concrete change. Fanon believed that “the more the people understand, the more vigilant they become, the more they realize in fact that everything depends on them and that their salvation lies in their solidarity, in recognizing their interests and identifying their enemies” (Fanon 2004, 133). The ultimate purpose of reading extends beyond individual enlightenment to encompass societal awakening and mobilization. His extensive journalism helped fulfil this function of collective political education, which in turn suggests the value of reading outside the theoretical, the timeless, the abstract. Perhaps reading contemporary journalism from minorities helps bridge the gap between theory and direct knowledge of the population?

He was “not satisfied with academic language”; his prose was characterised by its “poetry and rhythm” (Fanon 2016, 14). It “demands to be read aloud”, as a result, perhaps, of him often dictating it rather than writing it directly (Cherki 2006, 160; Fanon 2016, 14). He intended to “touch my reader in his emotions, i.e., irrationally, almost sensually”, aiming to “convey an experience by going ‘one-on-one with words’” and to write “inside the sensory dimension of language in order to give rise to a new way of thinking” (Macey 2001, 162). How-

ever, a writer can successfully appeal to the reader's emotionality in this way only if the reader allows it: to be touched by this kind of writing we must be open to its language and affect. In reading solely for information we foreclose the possibility of being emotionally inspired to act.

In Fanon's *French Antilles*, the societal pressure to speak "the French of France, the Frenchman's French, French French"—and so escape "jungle status"—and the explicit scorn for native dialects like Creole exemplify internalised inferiority and the profound desire to appear "almost white" (Fanon 2008, 9–11, 25):

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is.

For the Antillean, the French language and culture became the dominant and often exclusive frame of reference, shaping their very understanding of themselves and their world (pp. 8–27, 61–81). This linguistic and cultural imposition, Fanon argues, directly contributes to the "depersonalization of the colonized subject" and their profound inability to answer the fundamental question, "who am I?" (Cherki 2006, 87). This is not all obvious for native speakers and the majority, reading in their own culture; as readers we must recognise how our language sets our frame of reference in this way. Reading texts requires that we not passively accept the language and its inherent biases and power dynamics, but critically analyse the medium itself.

For example, the act of a black person speaking "properly" can

be a potent form of resistance, disrupting established power dynamics and forcing the white colonizer to “give in” because the Negro has made himself “just as knowledgeable” (Fanon 2008, 23). When the colonised subject masters the coloniser’s language, the former strategically turns it against the latter, using it to articulate the former’s narratives of oppression and liberation. This represents a profound dialectical reversal: a tool of oppression is transmuted into a weapon of liberation. More generally, by reading the works of a particular entity, we can learn how they speak, and in this way emancipate ourselves from their control by fighting them on their own terms.

The need to realise this power of language, for reading to be a tool of liberation and to be integrated with cultural understanding, led to Fanon engaging with texts by critically appropriating them: to fundamentally transform their ideas to meet the needs of the colonised and to help in their struggle. He did not merely read Hegel, for example; he actively re-wrote Hegel’s philosophy for the specific context of colonial oppression. His “critical recovery” of Hegel’s dialectic demonstrates that his reading was not for simple comprehension, but for critical application and radical re-interpretation (Hudis 2015, 46). Likewise, he challenged the standard Marxist model by identifying the peasantry as the primary revolutionary force in Africa, a conclusion drawn from the specific social relations prevalent in colonial contexts (Fanon 2004, 5). This insistence on “stretching” Marx exemplifies a crucial aspect of Fanon’s use of texts: the imperative to critically contextualise seemingly universal theories (Hudis 2015, 9–10). This approach demands understanding the historical and social genesis of a theory and rigorously assessing its applicability (and inherent limitations) to different contexts, rather than dogmatically ap-

plying it without adaptation.

Reading, then, is never a neutral act; the language and cultural context of any text inherently shape the reader's perception, interpretation, and ultimately, their understanding of the world. We must be aware of these implicit factors, and always have praxis in mind. We should select books that arm us for the struggle against oppression, use them to understand and dismantle problematic power structures, then move beyond them to join the people in action, creating a new reality, a new culture, a new human, that their authors couldn't have even imagined:

The colonized intellectual...who strives for cultural authenticity, must recognize that national truth is first and foremost the national reality. He must press on until he reaches that place of bubbling trepidation from which knowledge will emerge. (Fanon 2004, 161)

## Felski, Rita (1956-)

Felski is a scholar and author.

She argues that the meaning of literature lies in how actual readers use it, so its aesthetic value is inseparable from its use (Felski 2008, 8). Yet the dominant mode of literary criticism is negative and suspicious, so literary and cultural critics are beginning to ask “what is lost when a dialogue with literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis, when the remedial reading of texts loses all sight of why we are drawn to such texts in the first place” (p. 1)? As readers, we may ask: what value is criticism to us?

Literary criticism is predominately negative in that its ultimate aim is critical reading, which assigns all the value of reading to the act and reader, rather than what is read; Felski counters: “Do we gain nothing in particular from what we read” (pp. 2–3)? This criticism is suspicious through its over-engagement in the hermeneutics of suspicion<sup>4</sup>: reading texts in a paranoid fashion (Felski 2008, 3). In this way, “[t]he negative has become inescapably, overbearingly, normative” (ibid.).

So, there are problems with current criticism and it seems disconnected with the needs of the reader. Felski wonders, therefore, whether we can retain a critical stance yet also consider the positive merits of a work of literature. She suggests that we should “combine a willingness to suspect with an eagerness to listen; there is no reason why our readings cannot blend analysis and attachment, criticism and love” (p. 22).

To describe these positive uses of literature, Felski proposes

---

<sup>4</sup>See Ricoeur, Paul

that “reading involves a logic of *recognition*; that aesthetic experience has analogies with *enchantment* in a supposedly disenchanted age; that literature creates distinctive configurations of social *knowledge*; that we may value the experience of being *shocked* by what we read” (p. 14).

Her approach comprises a neo-phenomenology of the varied and sometimes contradictory reasons we value literature (p. 135). This is attentive to the first-person perspective, and “insists that the world is always the world as it appears to us, as it is filtered through our consciousness, perception, and judgment” (p. 17).

This teaches us to question our prejudices and beliefs because we realise that our reactions are not spontaneous but shaped by cultural factors: acknowledging the historicity of our experience. But it also reminds us that we cannot escape our vantage point from which we evaluate texts (ibid.). By tying literary analysis to the first-person, phenomenology can clarify how and why particular texts matter to us (pp. 19–20). It calls upon us “to honor our implication and involvement in the works we read, rather than serving as shame-faced bystanders to our own aesthetic response” (p. 20). Instead of always digging for a deeper, hidden meaning, we should pay more attention to what the text offers on its surface: “look at, rather than through, the literary work, to attend to the act of saying rather than only the substance of what is said” (ibid.).

This broader consideration of the values of literary experience undermines the dichotomy between high and low art. Reading is evaluation in that we’re condemned to endlessly select, sort, distinguish, and privilege, so are incapable of favouring texts equally. By leaving our “emphatic experience”, and its

evaluative criteria, wide open, Felski grants a broad range of aesthetic response: readers can be affected by many different works for many varied reasons, so we have permission to be moved by the low-brow (pp. 20–1).

It's widely believed that we can learn about ourselves through reading (p. 12). This use of literature, termed "recognition" by Felski, is a "perplexing and paradoxical" thing: "in a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority, something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am" (p. 25). Recognition can provide self-intensification, through awareness that our experiences are distinctive but not unique, and self-extension, by showing us ourselves in what initially seems strange (p. 39). We have been cautioned against this by critics who assume that if readers align themselves with fictional characters then they will necessarily adopt that character's ideologies wholesale, yet there's clearly much more nuance involved (p. 34). By developing our ability to see ourselves in the text we develop a greater awareness of the Other.

When literature is used for enchantment, it can be absorbing and intensely pleasurable such that it "confounds our deeply held beliefs about the rationality and autonomy of persons" (p. 54). Again, this powerful experience is demeaned by criticism which upholds the ideal of demystification: "the modern dogma that our lives should be thoroughly disenchanted" (p. 76). The modern literary critic, that is, wants to puncture this enchantment by explaining how the text has this effect, how it draws us in, with the implication that to be enchanted is to be tricked or deceived. Enchantment has been portrayed as a regression to the primitive/childish or nostalgic ways of experiencing fiction, so has been associated with sexism, clas-

sism, and iconophobia (pp. 53, 71). The enchanted reader is depicted as a credulous simpleton who accedes entirely to the book's ideological influence, but in fact we can both acknowledge that these worlds are imaginary, and also enjoy their absorptive effects (pp. 74–5). We can perhaps fall in love again with this type of reading by rejecting the outdated understanding of enchantment, and placing ourselves at the mercy of the text.

The antithesis of enchantment is shock: “Instead of being rocked and cradled, we find ourselves ambushed and under assault”—it breaches our defences (p. 113). Modern criticism assumes that the shocking is synonymous with the new, but this can't account for classic texts managing to shock us. This speaks to an enigma of textual transmission: “how do we hold fast to the idea that works bear the imprint of their historical moment, while also accounting for their potential to resonate across time” (pp. 114–115, 119–120)? Here, then, Felski is raising a broader question involving literary meaning.

Historical criticism “enriches our understanding of the provenance of a work of art, but it can also inspire a stunted view of texts as governed entirely by the conditions of their origin” (p. 120). Instead, Felski suggests, texts are temporally volatile: they “do not disclose themselves irrevocably and absolutely at the moment of their first appearance”, but their meaning is “washed forward into the future”; they may even “experience a hectic, even frenetic, afterlife characterized by new convergences and mutating constellations of meaning” (pp. 115, 119). Texts can “speak across centuries” because: “[t]heir very untimeliness renders them newly timely” (p. 119). Perhaps we can take from this insight two reminders:



not to write off older texts as being outdated or untimely, and to avoid historically-stunted interpretation of them. A text can be both ancient and modern.

Reading in general “often calls for a cross-temporal leap, a destabilizing shift from one time frame and cultural sensibility to another” (p. 92). We can negotiate this encounter by “attending to the salience of what is said and what is left unsaid, by reading looks and gestures, attending to half-voiced thoughts and inchoate sensations, we become attuned to criteria of distinction that seem at first glance to be baffling or opaque, that may surprise us in their sheer arbitrariness.” (ibid.). This is a careful, observant reading that stabilises us not by skimming past foreign elements but through cultivating awareness that these kind of details have relevance in the world of the text, and by extension in other people’s lives. Through this inter-subjectivity we gain “a view of particular societies “from the inside”; we come to know something of what it feels to be inside a particular habitus, to experience a world as self-evident, to bathe in the waters of a way of life” (ibid.). This is one way literature can reveal knowledge when read with an open mind and perceptive curiosity.

Books are also used for political knowledge. They are sometimes defined as ideology, which implies that we have assumed they “can be objects of knowledge but never sources of knowledge. It is to rule out of court the eventuality that a literary text could know as much, or more, than a theory” (p. 7). It’s valuable to ask political questions of texts, but Felski wonders “what is lost when we deny a work any capacity to...challenge or change our own beliefs and commitments”

(pp. 6–7)? How do we navigate “the Scylla of political functionalism and the Charybdis of art for art’s sake, striving to do justice to the social meanings of artworks without slighting their aesthetic power?” (p. 9). We can say, at least, that to read literature as ideology is to marshal it for or against our cause rather than allowing it to challenge us (ibid.):

Texts...lack the power to legislate their own effects; the internal features of a literary work tell us little about how it is received and understood, let alone its impact, if any, on a larger social field. Political function cannot be deduced or derived from literary structure

Texts only act through their readers, passing through “densely woven filters of interpretation and affective orientation that both enable and limit their impact” (p. 18). By explaining some of these filters and how texts can impact us, Felski both suggests different aspects of a book to attend to, and that the influence of popular criticism can diminish our reading experience. We’re also invited to read different kinds of books to experience these effects. Reading for enchantment, say, may necessitate very different reading material for a hidebound adult.

## **Fish, Stanley (1938-)**

Stanley Fish is an American literary theorist and legal scholar.

His views on how literature is interpreted and criticised evolved in public throughout his career, but even those that he partially repudiated are instructive in thinking about how we use books (Fish 1980, 1–17).

In 1970, he suggested that thinking in terms of what a text means as a whole—“sentence, page, work”—is to ignore the reader’s temporal experience of meaning (pp. 43–44). Our understanding of a text is incomplete if we attempt to describe what a text is rather than considering what the text does to us, moment by moment, while we’re reading. Instead of asking what a sentence means we should ask what it does. An implication is that the act of reading creates the text; its meaning can never be independent of the reader because meaning is an event that occurs in the process of a particular reading. The meaning will therefore shift as we progresses through the text, responding and predicting.

Yet he was subsequently careful to resist complete relativism by locating the production of meanings in the “interpretative community” of which the reader is a member (p. 171). This community is composed of norms and strategies with which texts are written (*ibid.*). The interpretive strategies of this community “give texts their shape” and provide acceptable approaches to reading them (p. 168). That is, the strategies make texts what they are rather than “arising from them” (*ibid.*).

This approach to interpretation will seem obvious to other members of the community, but not necessarily to members

of others—it is the objective result of an agreement but subjective in that other parties may not be able to recognise it (pp. 15, 171). Further, the very “act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it” (p. 11).

Texts, on this view, change in different times and places. At the very least this should caution us against asserting that our interpretation is correct, despite it seeming obvious to us as a consequence of our membership in an interpretative community. The extent to which some of Fish’s ideas now seem like common sense, especially in certain academic circles, proves this point. It also suggests that by considering how other interpretative communities evaluate texts with which we’re familiar, we may, like Fish, be able to continue to expand our experiences of culture.

## Frye, Northrop (1912-1991)

Frye was a Canadian literary critic and theorist.

He hypothesised a “unified imaginative system”, a “total schematic order, interconnected by recurring or conventional myths and metaphors”, *archetypes*, underpinning all literature (Frye 2006a, 417; Frye 2009, 407). These archetypes and myths are the foundations of culture—from religious texts and the classical world—and literature is derivative of myth (Frye 2008a, 8). Living in a culture suffuses an author with the archetypes it transmits through religion and art, so they necessarily embed and express these concepts in the author’s work. Accordingly, we “can get a whole liberal education simply by picking up one conventional poem and following its archetypes as they stretch out into the rest of literature” (Frye 2000a, 100). All books are connected.

As soon as we start to consider what a text means or sounds similar to, we become critics, and the unity underlying literature requires the critic to interpret every work in the context of all the works they know, to attempt to grasp literature as a whole (Frye 1964, 105; Frye 2002a, 236). Their primary activity is understanding literature by establishing a context for the works they study (Frye 2009, 160–161). As critical readers, we comprehend texts by relating them to the author’s life and times, literary history, and literature’s unity (*ibid.*). In this way we understand more deeply and more broadly because in understanding one work better we better understand those that we’ve read already, and by better understanding literature as a whole, we better understand each work therein (Frye 2007a, 309).

Criticism is not a threat to literature. The only thing that “‘kills’ literature” is the “stock response” to either literature or its criticism, “which is always founded on prejudiced, ignorant and unacknowledged value-judgements” (Frye 2002b, 97). Strong criticism “annihilates the stock response by bringing it to life with a new understanding” (ibid.). Critical reading on this view demands recognising and avoiding making such responses.

If archetypes link texts, then critical reading means recognising these archetypes. To do this we must often “stand back” from a text to see how it repeats elements from other texts (Frye 2000a, 140). Stepping back further we identify other levels on which meaning can be found in text, depending on our approach to symbolism: the literal, descriptive, formal, and anagogic<sup>5</sup> (ibid.). The book is “the world’s most patient medium” because it “comes back with exactly the same message no matter how often you consult it”, so by adopting a different view of meaning we can change how we interpret this message (Frye 2008b, 714).

There’s a distinction between our “direct experience of the work of itself, while we’re reading”, which is pre-critical; and the “conscious, critical response we make after we’ve finished reading (Frye 1964, 104). The latter practice improves our pre-critical responses—again suggesting that better understanding literature’s unity develops in us a deeper, more sagacious disposition to other works.

As readers we have a “consciousness that subjects itself to

---

<sup>5</sup>The anagogic involves the universal archetypal symbols which obviate the distinction between reader and nature (p. 119)

the text and understands, and another that, so to speak, overstands". Without this ability to overstand we are "a pedant who understands but does not comprehend" (Frye 2008a, 84). This detached, overstanding role is performed by the critical reader, while the imaginative reader willingly suspends *belief* and implicitly adheres to literary convention (Frye 2002b, 96–7). To do otherwise is to be a "reader who quarrels with postulates, who dislikes Hamlet because he does not believe that there are ghosts", and so clearly has "no business in literature" (Frye 2000a, 76).

There are different approaches, then, that we need to adopt in reading imaginative literature: as we read, we surrender to the world of the text, playing by the rules of the genre; but afterwards, we need to explicitly criticise the text, exploring how it connects to other works, in order to comprehend.

People who have little interest in books may express an indifference in that they're "not blown about by every wind of doctrine" (Frye 2003a, 20–21). People who are deeply interested in books need to acquire a similar distance from what they read: we need a "growing detachment from what we possess and a growing sympathy with what is alien" (Frye 2000b, 156; Frye 2003a, 20–21).

Literature is an "autonomous verbal structure", whose meaning is "hypothetical", bearing an "assumed relation to the external world" (Frye 2000a, 74). The "universal imagination" involved in a text explains why this meaning is independent of its author (Frye 1958, 394). This is why "we do not get closer to the author's meaning by getting closer to the book's meaning. The greater the book, the more obvious it is that the author's consciousness merely held the nozzle of the hose" (Frye

2010, 15). On this view, an author can't help but reproduce cultural archetypes, and if they didn't, we wouldn't relate to their work.

The classics are "what's worth studying" (Frye 2007b, 340). A great book is "a work that refuses to go away, that remains confronting us until we do something about it, which means also doing something about ourselves" (Frye 2000c, 90). Or, as Frye puts it elsewhere (Frye 2006b, 283):

Every work of literature has to die and be reborn  
in the individual studying it. It doesn't just stay  
out there; it becomes part of him or her. Without  
that death and resurrection there is no genuine  
possession of literature

The "real intensity" of a work emerges from rereading it, almost as "a technique of meditation" (p. 198). If the poet is genuine, we'll remember the "poem, or part of a poem, without making a conscious effort to do so" (Frye 2003b, 132–3).

Yet, Frye admits that he's handicapped in his scholarship by "the immense difficulty I find in finishing long works of fiction. I seem to get the point after about 100 pages" (Frye 2002b, 208). This suggests that even excellent readers, and prolific academics, don't necessarily share the conventional approach to *finishing* a book.

We have seen that literature implies "a community of shared imaginative experience" (Frye 2003c, 150). A book connects those whom it affects: it is "a stationary visual focus of a community" (Frye 2009, 316). But books also have "the opposite tendency of individualising the audience" (Frye 2003c, 150). In this way we can use them as a "companion in a dialogue



with ourselves” to “structure and make sense of the flood of automatic gabble that keeps rolling through the mind” (Frye 2000b, 602–603).

## **Fuller, Margaret (1810-1850)**

Fuller was a journalist, Transcendentalist, and women's rights advocate.

She was educated at home by her father because he was proud of his Harvard education, yet couldn't send his daughter there because of her gender. She was reading Ovid and Horace in Latin, and learning French, before becoming a teen. When reading of Greek and Roman heroes, she considered "these luminaries her companions, their struggles her inspiration" (D. M. Robinson 2013). She read herself into the texts making "the classical heritage and Western culture her own" (ibid.). This study program was intense, but transformed from a burden into reading becoming "a habit and passion" (Anthony 1921, 12). Her homeschooling fostered a lifelong practice of self-directed education through reading and conversation. Guided by the principle of self-culture, Fuller remarked: "Very early I knew that the only object in life was to grow" (D. M. Robinson 2013 (quoted in)).

This precocious childhood led her to conclude that children shouldn't learn to read too early because "they should not through books antedate their actual experiences, but should take them gradually, as sympathy and interpretation are needed" (Anthony 1921, 22). Likewise, of adults she wrote: a "moment of action in one's self, is worth an age of apprehension through others; not that our deeds are better, but that they produce a renewal of our being" (ibid.). In a letter she phrased this notion as: "There are noble books but one wants the breath of life sometimes" (M. Fuller 2001, 79).

She realised that the rigorous pedagogical methods her father

employed “had prevented the harmonious development of my bodily powers, and checked my growth” (D. M. Robinson 2013 (quoted in)). From this came her belief in the necessity of harmonious development in pursuing self-culture. Reading in this way must be combined with “the teachings of the little garden”—a refuge in nature which “provided a measure of the security and expressive release that she had been denied” (ibid. (quoted in)). In the garden, her “thoughts could lie callow in the nest, and only be fed and kept warm, not called to fly or sing before their time” (ibid. (quoted in)).

Harmonious self-culture requires not only nature and time to reflect at one’s own pace but also a “self-in-relation, unfolding its nature in association with others” (ibid.). Cooperative relationships and community became a vital part of Fuller’s conception of personal growth and reading. She came to approach “reading and writing not as separate and autonomous acts but instead as continually intersecting and mutually constitutive habits” of collaboration (ibid.). Her letters to friends and associates always came back to reflections on what they read, and especially in her later literary criticism, this organic perspective on the use of books for growth contrasted sharply with the scholarship endorsed by her father (M. Fuller 2001). Without discussion, writing, and nature, she concluded, reading may achieve utilitarian aims but at the cost of one’s health and spirit.

The casual literary criticism that Fuller and her correspondents engaged in, which led to her later professional criticism, confirmed to her that reading the criticism of others is useful in stimulating and suggesting thought. It does not benefit

us when “a polite response to what we thought before”, but when it expresses “the freshness of thought in other minds” which awakens new thoughts in us: “We do not want stores of information only, but to be roused to digest these into knowledge” (S. M. Fuller 1846, 7). “In books, in reviews...we wish to meet thinking men, not schoolmasters or pleaders”—“we would live with them, rather than be taught by them how to live” (ibid.). It is not, then, the place of critics to advocate causes or ideologies or tell us what not to read or how specific books should be interpreted (p. 5). We must not indolently acquiesce to dictatorial reviewers. Fuller classifies critics as “subjective”, “apprehensive”, or “comprehensive”.

The subjective “state their impressions as they rise, of other men’s spoken, written, or acted thoughts”, and don’t consider other perspectives and points of view (p. 2). They “love, they like, or they hate...these statements they make with authority” (ibid.). Such criticisms merely record impressions, they are reflexive responses (ibid.). They are from “a savage who does not hesitate to say of the product of a civilization on which he could not stand, ‘It is bad,’ or ‘It is good’” (ibid.). We can recognise this approach in how children often read; one they don’t necessarily grow out of.

The apprehensive critics are able to “go out of themselves and enter fully into a foreign existence”, reproducing the text to “make it better known to us” (p. 3). Their work is “ideal as well as historical” (ibid.). This kind of criticism can be more pleasurable to read, more truer, than the text being reviewed. It more closely approximate the standard of criticism than the subjective class (ibid.).

The comprehensive type is also apprehensive—they “enter

into the nature of another being and judge his work by its own law”—but then they “also know how to put that aim in its place, and how to estimate its relations” (ibid.). This critic is “worthy to judge” the work because they perceive “the analogies of the universe, and how they are regulated by an absolute, invariable principle” (ibid.). From this, the comprehensive critic can “see how far that work expresses this principle, as well as how far it is excellent in its details”, they “can walk around the work...try its weight” (ibid.).

A critic has “the poetical temperament to apprehend, with the philosophical tendency to investigate” (ibid.). They are analytic, a “historian who records the order of creation” (p. 4). They “should be not merely a poet, not merely a philosopher, not merely an observer, but tempered of all three” (ibid.). These classifications of critic not only map to how good readers develop, but also describe an ideal: a holistic combination of traits with which to pursue harmonious self-culture.

If the only object in life is to grow, how do we grow as readers? Perhaps, we should identify the type of reader we are currently—i.e. subjective, apprehensive, or comprehensive—and consider how to progress to the next stage; if we’re already a comprehensive reader, how can we refine our approach? To develop taste and background knowledge a great deal of wide, apprehensive reading is necessary. Before the comprehensive practice becomes habitual we may need to intentionally emulate it by seeking out and evaluating the relations between works as we read. Further, we must integrate discussion with our reading, both in writing and in person, in order to expand our perspective on what we’ve read and keep us connected to

others, and also reflect in nature, so as to allow our reading to work on us and develop into knowledge.

## **Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1900-2002)**

Gadamer was a German philosopher with a focus on hermeneutics.

To learn from books they must challenge us. We're biased to seek information that coheres with what we already know, and it's reassuring to be reminded that we're right, but learning is the opposite process.

Books challenge us when they provoke our prejudices by triggering bodily affect: we feel surprise, disgust, discomfort, intrigue. We may be unable to make the prejudice itself conscious, but the experience of reading can make it felt and thus a subject of reflection—"prejudice as a condition of truth" (Weinsheimer 1985, 164–184). This is how learning begins.

A prejudice for Gadamer is a "judgement that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (2013, 316). Our prejudices are clearly shaped by tradition and history (Weinsheimer 1985, 169–170). Many of the principles we believe are based on what our ancestors believed—rightly or wrongly—with morality being an obvious example. We ground most beliefs in the authority of others rather than reasoning them out for ourselves because that's the only practical way to live (Simms 2015, 72–74, 134–135). Legitimate prejudices save us from infinite regress by ceding authority to legitimate others; illegitimate prejudices distort our understanding and divide us against our fellows (Gadamer 2013, 323). We seek to discriminate between our prejudices by continually testing them against our tradition and interlocutors, then overcoming those on

which we're "pulled up short" (pp. 280, 316). We don't seek to eliminate them because there is no judgement without prejudice. However much we learn, we will always have prejudices; our aim is to adopt better ones and overcome the negative.

We judge books by their covers, first chapter, and our general impressions, because we project our prejudices to predict the whole from the part—"Understanding is projection" (Wein-sheimer 1985, 166). If our initial predictions are borne out by the remainder of the book, then we have understood yet learned little. Being right reminds us that we wasted our time. If a text does not challenge us, or we aren't receptive to learning, it can only confirm what we already believed. A text from which we learn is a crucible in which some of our prejudices are disconfirmed.

To affect us a text must be both challenging and interesting. A textbook for a subject you're compelled to study may contain challenging material, but because it doesn't engage you, you aim to simply mirror it in your memory; encode to retrieve. Lacking emotional investment in the author's claims, you read more as a disinterested, objective observer. Passive reception of an author's opinion isn't learning. It's at best memorisation, although ironically your lack of interest impairs your recollection, too.

There's a need, then, to adopt a certain attitude toward a book from which you wish to learn. Passive reading is uninteresting because it doesn't involve who the reader is. This is why attempts at mere perspective taking fail: to take the perspective of another is to abandon one's own, and without your own perspective, you can't learn your own



lessons. Gadamer's alternative to perspective taking is that the reader should aspire to fuse their *horizon* with that of the text (Gadamer 2013, 305). A horizon is "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point"—a world view (p. 345). We must "transpose" ourselves into "the historical horizon from which the traditional text speaks" (p. 398). This fusion is never to be achieved in practice because our horizon is in constant motion as a result of our experiences—"understanding is primarily the attempt to reach an understanding" (Weinsheimer 1985, 177).

Reading needs to involve a dialogue with the text. This is the spirit behind the popular suggestion that reading a book should be a conversation between you and the author, but that isn't quite Gadamer's position. Our interlocutor is actually the text, because the text is autonomous and its author unknowable (at least psychologically) (Simms 2015, 18–19, 93). It is the text that speaks to posterity, and is inherited by future generations as a historical artefact (p. 95). In a conversation between contemporaries one speaks to specific individuals, but the text has no addressee. Or, rather, even if it did, this no longer defines its audience (*ibid.*). Its audience is universalised—essentially anybody who can read—such that the text gains a life of its own, independent of the author, situated in tradition.

The contrasting view is that to read is to recreate the text by following the author's process—discovering why they wrote, what they were thinking, and whether they were writing for some specific reader (Gadamer 2013, 186). This is to commit the intentional fallacy. We shouldn't seek to reproduce the opinion of the author but to understand the truth. The

meaning of a specific text for a specific reader is constructed by the two in dialogue; it's not recovered from the past. The understanding reader is the arbiter of the text's claim to truth (p. 433).

This conversation between us and a text must be conducted with an openness to learning, but openness isn't deference. We are neither a blank slate for the text's imprinting, nor the tide which brings in its bounty and washes away what was already there. Instead, we are curious and vulnerable. We make our prejudices questionable in order to give the text a chance to affect us, but also pose questions for the text. Posing questions is necessary for reading to be a conversation. When a text makes a claim it is a response to a question, and when disconfirming of our prejudices, prompts us to question the claim. The meaning of a claim is given by the question to which it is an answer (p. 367).

The question to which the text responds is not to be found in the intentions of the author, or any original audience for whom they wrote; it's found in us. This doesn't mean it's arbitrary, though; rather, it's sensible given the *situation* in which the text was written (p. 301). By situation, Gadamer means the circumstances which limit our understanding, such as historical, social, cultural, and linguistic factors. This is why even if we could know what question the author had in mind when making a claim, it wouldn't necessarily be relevant in our situation. We can't assume the question of the author to be the one actually answered by the text: "its meaning necessarily exceeds what is said in it" (p. 363). Successful answers in one situation may not even count as useful in another, so when a question arises, it must be asked anew. This is why "the mean-

ing of the text is constantly changing: interpretation and re-interpretation are ceaseless tasks” (Lawn 2006, 74).

A question must engage us by involving our concerns; addressing a finite range of live possibilities for us (Gadamer 2013, 357). It can’t be rhetorical, because that wouldn’t address any possibilities, and it can’t be generic or boundless, because then it wouldn’t admit an answer. It should make possible the item under question being other than what we thought. We bring a set of prejudices to a text from which we have an interest in learning, allow the text to prompt questions which interest us, and are encouraged to formulate questions which the text could sensibly answer. A “logic of question and answer” occurs (p. 411).

A theme is developing of the text being distant from the reader by virtue of it being a text. There’s the historical and sociological dimension, potentially a translation involved, and the unavailability of the author’s intention to us. There’s a tension between understanding as projecting from what we already know, and avoiding silencing an ancient text by imposing upon it “exclusively contemporary categories” (Lawn 2006, 74). This can be felt as alienating, but can also be liberating when conscious because of how it brings our beliefs into sharp relief. Writing distances, reading appropriates. The interplay between questions that engage us and distance that challenges us is how reading rewards and teaches.

This helps explain why Gadamer suggested that we eschew scientific, rationalistic methods of interpretation which try to remove both our subjectivity and traditions from the process (p. 41). He demonstrated that this was infeasible because all knowledge is human knowledge, and that of a particular hu-

man and of a particular object. Reader and text have a historicity that it is vital to remain conscious of—"we are always part of what it is we seek to understand" (p. 39). In understanding a book, we should seek to fuse horizons without pretending that they don't exist or attempting to universalise the Other.

## **Gallop, Jane (1952-)**

Gallop is an American professor of English and Comparative Literature.

When we read we tend to project what we think the author would have written rather than seeing what they actually wrote (Gallop 2000, 10). A simple example is how we fail to spot typographical errors, especially in our own writing: we know what we expect to see, so that's what we find. However, we project at all levels of reading. Gallop is interested in what we miss when we read ourselves into the text rather than listening to what it truly says.

“Projecting is the opposite of learning” (p. 11). We only project what we already think, so are unable to see anything new. We also project when we stereotype. We're familiar with the impact of negative, harmful stereotypes, but Gallop is also concerned with their “positive” counterparts such as the “noble savage and the selfless nurturing mother”—both types are dehumanising (p. 15). She argues that through them we tend to view the Other as “our polar opposite”, which affects how we view people, authors, and texts (ibid.). This polarisation leads us to treat a book as either “great, wise, admirable”, or “bad, stupid, dangerous”, brooking no nuance (p. 16). In the first case, we “read it lovingly looking for instances of its wisdom, ignoring those things that seem wrong or off to us”; in the second, we “read it aggressively looking for examples of its stupidity, ignoring those things that we might actually like or agree with.” (ibid.). Both stances are totalising and projective. When an author has been accused of holding particular prejudices, for example, readers can feel that they need to fearfully defend the author's

reputation because a flawed author can no longer be enjoyed (pp. 15–16). Likewise, some of Gallop’s students read (p. 16):

using a mental checklist to look for sexism, racism, or something else from the ever-growing list of official prejudices so they can dismiss it. If it fails the checklist they feel they don’t have to deal with it, don’t have to learn what’s inside.

She suggests that the antidote to this state of affairs is “close reading”: looking at what is actually on the page, “noticing things *in the writing*” that stand out. The aspects she identifies seem marginal. They’re both minor yet “nonetheless emphatic, prominent”, they “textually call attention to themselves” (p. 8). Gallop offers the following examples of what a close reading may notice (p. 7):

1. unusual vocabulary, words that surprise either because they are unfamiliar or because they seem to belong to a different context;
2. words that seem unnecessarily repeated, as if the word keeps insisting on being written;
3. images or metaphors, especially ones that are used repeatedly and are somewhat surprising given the context;
4. what is in italics or parentheses; and
5. footnotes that seem too long.

Focusing on these kind of features “is a method of undoing the training that keeps us to the straight and narrow path of main ideas” (p. 8). We are trained to read a book globally: “to

think of the book as a whole, identify its main idea, and understand all of its parts as fitting together to make up that whole” (p. 11). However, this general outline is most likely what corresponds to our preconceptions; by “concentrating on details, we disrupt our projection” (ibid.):

When we close read, we zero in on details but we do not immediately fit those details into our idea of the whole book. Instead we try to understand the details themselves as much as possible, to derive as much meaning as we can from them.

This applies to non-fiction as much as to fiction, making us hyperaware of even elements of “newspapers” and “signs in shop windows” which otherwise went unnoticed (p. 8). It is also “a technique to maximize learning” because it forces us to look not at the familiar, but at the surprising—so we see the material we need to learn [Gallop (2000), pp. 11. It aids our writing because it forces us to attend to what other people will see when they read our work (pp. 8–10).

The general principle of close reading, then, is “read not what should be on the page but what is”: “become conscious of what [you] usually remain unconscious of” (pp. 8–9). By focusing our attention away from the big picture, on the easily stereotyped features, we are able to listen fairly to the text. Even more important for Gallop, we should apply this principle to our interpersonal interactions in order that we listen to the Other more carefully, too. Close reading is a way of listening more attentively, causing us to notice “unexpected words and allowing them to shake up our preconceived notions” (pp. 12–13). Gallop wants us “suspicious of our tendency to project” (p. 13).

## **Gibbon, Edward (1737-1794)**

Gibbon was an historian and English politician.

In his youth he read idly or desultorily, which he came to regret because this “vague and multifarious reading could not teach [him] to think, to write, or to act” (Gibbon 2006, 39, 55). Yet this “cheap acquisition of so much knowledge” led him to focus on reading history, which no doubt kindled his life-long passion for the subject (p. 29). He began studying at Oxford University, both ignorant and erudite, and left without “original learning, unformed in the habits of thinking, unskilled in the arts of composition” (pp. 31, 39). A passion for, and intense practice of, reading isn’t sufficient to work with what you read.

The turning point was when a kind mentor deftly led him “from a blind and undistinguishing love of reading, into the path of instruction” (p. 51). This plan involved a course of study “consecrated to a plan of modern history and geography, and to the critical perusal of the French and Latin classics” in the mornings (ibid.). Gibbon found this pleasurable, “invigorated by the habits of application and method” (ibid.). When he had habituated this “industry and temperance”, the mentor gave him back control of his learning (ibid.). Gibbon’s youthful passion for reading needed direction; reading desultorily was not conducive to the use he wished to put books, so he needed to learn habits and discipline.

Subsequently Gibbon thought in terms of plans of study, whereby he created a curriculum for himself then read the appropriate books. For example, he “formed a more extensive plan of reviewing the Latin classics, under the four divisions



of, 1. historians, 2. poets, 3. orators, and 4. philosophers, in a chronological series”, and nearly accomplished it over twenty-seven months (p. 54). He abstracted each book and these observations often evolved into essays (*ibid.*). He defined his areas of interest, selected books that best spoke to these topics, approached them in a logical order, and set a deadline.

He was neither “hasty” nor “superficial”, reading some texts even a third time, and “never suffered a difficult or corrupt passage to escape, till I had viewed it in every light of which it was susceptible” (*ibid.*). If still unable to comprehend a passage he “consulted the most learned or ingenious commentators” and experts—in mathematics and anatomy, for instance (pp. 54, 80–81). He also benefited from the work he could undertake with a friend (p. 54):

To him every thought, every composition, was instantly communicated; with him I enjoyed the benefits of a free conversation on the topics of our common studies

When he had more leisure he dropped such plans. For example, he involved himself “in the philosophic maze of the writings of Plato” and “stepped aside into every path of inquiry which reading or reflection accidentally opened” (p. 130). He combined strict study plans with more exploratory reading now he was confident in his study habits. However, he “began to wish for the daily task, the active pursuit, which gave a value to every book, and an object to every inquiry”; when he’d settled on a plan for a new edition of the history book he was writing he “dropped without reluctance from the age of Plato” to the subject of his book (p. 119).

When travelling in Europe he kept a notebook of remarks on the geography and his experiences but also long, learned reflections (p. 91). However, his attempts to conduct his reading “according to the precept and model of Mr. Locke<sup>6</sup>, into a large common-place book”, weren’t to his liking—he questioned whether the benefits obtained exceeded the labour it required (Gibbon 2006, 57). Instead, he followed Samuel Johnson<sup>7</sup> in believing “that what is twice read, is commonly better remembered, than what is transcribed” (Johnson 1825a; Gibbon 2006, 57). Gibbon recommends another practice of his to young students (Gibbon 2006, 70):

After glancing my eye over the design and order of a new book, I suspended the perusal till I had finished the task of self examination, till I had revolved, in a solitary walk, all that I knew or believed, or had thought on the subject of the whole work, or of some particular chapter: I was then qualified to discern how much the author added to my original stock; and I was sometimes satisfied by the agreement, I was sometimes armed by the opposition of our ideas.

---

<sup>6</sup>See Locke, John

<sup>7</sup>See Johnson, Samuel

## Hare, Julius Charles (1795-1855)

Hare was an English theological writer.

Hare saw “desultory reading” as mischievous (Hare 1867, 151). By hasty, indiscriminate, discursive reading, where each book addresses a different subject, we weaken our mind because our thought becomes looser and discontinuous, and our attention, too relaxed (*ibid.*). This is so unfruitful that we forget what we have read after we have finished a book, or perhaps sooner (p. 458).

Hare charged Samuel Johnson<sup>8</sup> with this desultory reading (1867, 476). Johnson is described at only looking into a book “to contemplate his own image in it; and when anything came across that image, he turned to another volume” (p. 477). This habit arose from his inability to enter other people’s minds. Hare saw Johnson as an erudite speaker, but lacking in the willpower to reason, which requires “meditation or imagination” cultivated by continuous exercise (*ibid.*).

A “well-regulated course of study” is needed to strengthen the mind (p. 151). Hare contrasts “desultory reading and a course of study”: the former being “a number of mirrors set in a straight line, so that every one of them reflects a different object”, while the latter is “the same mirrors so skilfully arranged as to perpetuate one set of objects in an endless series of reflexions” (p. 81). By reading multiple books on the same subject, one book leads us to review the statements and arguments of the other, exposing errors which we may otherwise have missed (*ibid.*). Further, the truths which the books mutually reinforce are better remembered not

---

<sup>8</sup>See Johnson, Samuel

merely because they're repeated, but also because we become more convinced of their verity (*ibid.*). This is not to say, though, that we should restrict ourselves to a single course of study—that would cramp and deform our mind (*ibid.*). Indeed, Hare suggests that “liberal exercise is necessary”, encouraging the study of poetry, particularly (*ibid.*). We also gain a “firmer footing” by reading original works rather than second- or third-hand sources (pp. 149–150). For Hare, then, we should learn about one subject at a time, comparing and contrasting original and relevant books, but we should also study a diverse range of subjects.

This mental labour, the effortful straining of our cognitive faculties to obtain knowledge braces our minds and makes our learning “more our own” (p. 150). The difficult, effortful work has benefit by itself. Hare relates (p. 458):

I have ever gained the most profit, and the most pleasure also, from the books which have made me think the most: and, when the difficulties have once been overcome, these are the books which have struck the deepest root, not only in my memory and understanding, but likewise in my affections.

He glosses: “Notions may be imported by books from abroad; ideas must be grown at home by thought” (p. 297). As growing these ideas is often effortful, we must have faith in the merit or value of these notions in order to study them—who would take the trouble of cracking a nut if they did not believe it contained a kernel (p. 192)? Faith inspires the “energy, patience, and perseverance” that worthwhile reading requires. For Hare, belief precedes understanding.

## **Harrison, Frederic (1831-1923)**

Harrison was an English jurist, historian, and Positivist.

He saw great importance in ordering and making accessible and useful “the vast realm of printed material which four centuries have swept across our path” (Harrison 1893, 31). He wanted to organise knowledge and systematise reading so that out of this vast swathe of material, the “immortal thoughts of the greatest” could be saved (ibid.).

This “remorseless cataract of daily literature” presents the reader with a number of difficulties (pp. 26–7). It can lead to indiscriminate reading whereby we are open to anything that we encounter. Yet, to be this open ensures we’ll gain little from them: “To turn over the pages of ten thousand volumes is to be practically indifferent to all that is good” (pp. 31–2). With a surfeit of choice we become less discriminating in our selection. Every book we read without a purpose has an opportunity cost, and what we learn without purpose and sense of its importance, crowds out useful information from our minds. In this way, the habit of desultory, idle reading “debilitates and corrupts the mind for all wholesome reading” (p. 9). We are forever in danger of “being drawn off by what is stimulating rather than solid”: led to “wander, like unclassed spirits, round the outskirts only of those Elysian fields where the great dead dwell and hold high converse” (p. 160). Taking up books because they’re available and easy to read means we risk wasting our time with titles which are diverting but not substantive.

Another source of this “literary dandyism” is that there are so many authors, it can seem that anybody can become an au-

thor, and so there's an equality between authors and readers (pp. 13, 154–5). The fame of the classic authors has made them seem familiar to us, leaving us indifferent. They represent what you are supposed to have read—the dreary, assigned text—which we resist by being attracted to their opposite: the idiosyncratic, eccentric title merely because it's unfamiliar to us (p. 18). This unquenchable thirst for the new leads us to ignore the classic authors “just *because* they are immortal poets, and not scribblers of today” (p. 41).

Reading wisely is not a natural gift, but one of the hardest habits to form (p. 9). It requires “a strong character and a resolute system”, “infinite pains”, and is “as long and difficult to learn as the art of right living” (pp. 9, 18). A lesson we can learn more easily is what not to read (p. 5). In addition to avoiding the reading the new merely because it's new, we must remember that books cannot exceed the character, the intellect, of their authors (pp. 17, 50). We should require texts to prove their value, remaining cognisant that reading “little books” and those written by people of bad or undistinguished character can be injurious to us, even poisonous to our minds (pp. 1–3).

Another lesson is that we should aim “to know for the sake of living, not to live for the sake of knowing” (pp. 34–5). One of the most common and unwholesome habits is reading as an end in itself rather than for the benefit we gain from reading well (p. 9). We need to know in order that we may feel rightly and act wisely, but seeking truth for itself may be indulged to the point where our sympathies are enfeebled and our action unnerved (p. 34).

Healthy reading is holistic, aiming to better our whole nature

and character, and regarding “life as a whole, not mental curiosities” (p. 35). It appeals equally to our imagination, through poetry, our memory, through history and science, and reflection, through philosophy (*ibid.*). Our education will be one-sided despite much reading if this “runs wholly into” pockets,” and exhausts itself in the literature of one age, one country, one type” (pp. 34–6). This will tend to narrow our mind (p. 36).

Further, reading into pockets can deepen our belief that our country is “the hub of the universe” and that our century is “the only age worth notice” (p. 37). Books read in this way confirm and harden our unconscious prejudices (*ibid.*). Harrison suggests “a useful maxim that, if our reading be utterly closed to the great poems of the world, there is something amiss with our reading” (p. 39).

Their poets are “the great creators in prose or in verse” (p. 126). To understand a great national poet”, such as Dante, Calderon, Corneille, or Goethe, is “to know other types of human civilisation in ways which a library of histories does not sufficiently teach” (p. 43). Reading outside our milieu is necessary to avoid becoming hidebound and overly prejudiced, and Harrison exemplified this cosmopolitan, liberal ideal in his support of trade unions, democratic reform, and universal education—quite radical positions for his time.

In “the voice of all mankind as matchless and immortal, there is a complete library at hand for every man, in his every mood, whatever his tastes or his acquirements” (p. 142). Its treasure is discovered only when its contents are read devoutly (pp. 138–9):

One may be a devourer of books, and be actually incapable of reading a hundred lines of the wisest and the most beautiful. To read one of such books comes only by habit, as prayer is impossible to one who habitually dreads to be alone.



## Helps, Arthur (1813-75)

Helps was an English writer and political appointee.

He was concerned with the degree to which our reading and study came down to chance, “as regards their origin, their conduct and their end” (Helps, 260). He described the intellectual development of most adults as proceeding in this way: on returning from work a man “takes up whatever book may happen to be the reading of his wife, mother, or daughters: and they...are probably contented with what the circulating library affords, and read according to the merest rumour and fashion of the present hour” (pp. 261–2). To make “light literature” our mental staple in this way is extremely frivolous and unworthy, but Helps realises the difficulties in selecting contemporary books of merit, even for “highly-cultivated persons” (ibid.). People are often aware of “how indifferently they are spending their time”, so Helps suggests that they (pp. 262–3):

adopt some definite purpose in their reading—  
should take something for the main stem and  
trunk of their culture, whence branches might  
grow out in all directions seeking light and air  
for the parent tree which, it is hoped, might end  
in becoming something useful and ornamental,  
and which, at any rate, all along will have had  
life and growth in it

This purpose must be applied to a “subject”, a notion which encompasses finding “what the twenty or thirty great poets have said”, surveying “the greatest writers in morals and history”, reading a “hundred great authors”, pursuing a “branch of science”, or investigating a particular question in history

(pp. 266–7). If we care about our being as a whole, we should develop our faculties which are not required by our occupations or for which we are not naturally disposed—studying a subject anterior to our everyday lives (p. 270). So, an employee whose job “is always exercising the logical faculty”, would do well to read fiction and poetry at home (*ibid.*).

If we know one subject well then we have also learned about other areas because “all things are so connected together” (pp. 265–6). In working upon a particular branch of study we observe how every idea we encounter seems “to work in with, and assimilate itself to” our original subject (p. 266). It can seem as if our subject is independent of us, “always on the watch, and claiming its share in whatever is going on” (*ibid.*). Helps suggests that consciously pursuing just one area of study helps produce something that holds “together what is gained, but has vitality in itself, is always growing” (*ibid.*). This implies that pursuing few, specific courses of study needn’t “lead to pedantry and narrowness of mind” (p. 255).

All of the reasons people read—“amusement, instruction, a wish to appear well in society, and a desire to pass away time”—are bolstered by our employing a method (p. 264). When reading becomes a keen intellectual pursuit, even minor gains are enriched in significance, and dull details can yield interesting insight (*ibid.*). With questions in mind and a clear purpose, our reading becomes richer.

Pursuing study methodically can also improve our character in action because like any worthwhile endeavour, the moments of delight will be accompanied with vexation and vacillation which will test and strengthen our mettle (p. 269). In making these sacrifices we improve the culture of our mind (*ibid.*).

We should also “lay up in our minds a store of godly thoughts in well-wrought words” (pp. 267–8). If in our reading we make an effort to memorise a “living treasure of knowledge”, it will be with us when we most need to draw on it for “comfort, guidance, and sympathy” (ibid.). This doesn’t apply only to sacred writings: “In any work that it worth carefully reading, there is generally something that is worth remembering accurately” (p. 268).

Helps sees folly in prescribing a universal method of study, so instead suggests useful traits for a student to develop: a “just fear of desultory pursuits, and a wish for mental cultivation” (pp. 263–4). On this basis the student can hope to eventually discern what approach works best for them, but even if they don’t, pursuing anything in this manner will be rewarding (p. 264). In order to avoid unprofitable reading, then, we must avoid taking up books at random, vacillating in our studies, or only looking to them for ease or distraction (p. 272).

## **Hesse, Herman (1877-1962)**

Hesse was a German Nobel laureate who wrote poems, novels, and criticism.

“Among the many worlds which man did not receive as a gift of nature, but which he created with his own spirit, the world of books is the greatest”, he proclaimed (Hesse 1978, 153):

Without words, without writing, and without  
books there would be no history, there could be  
no concept of humanity

The endless world of books is so “great and mysterious” because as we endlessly go on with our reading, “making finer distinctions, heightening, strengthening”, the clearer our sight becomes, and the further we see (p. 161). The true reader both seeks and recognises themselves in what they read: “each verse of each poet will show a new and different face to the reader every few years, will awaken a different resonance in him” (pp. 159, 161). By learning to read more discriminatively, sensitively, and associatively, we come to see the uniqueness of each work, on which its beauty depends. World literature allows us to see even further because it charms into unity “the countenance of humanity” (p. 162). The “hundred thousand voices of nations strive toward the same goals, call upon the same gods by different names, dream the same wishes, suffer the same sorrows” (pp. 161–2). Perhaps this explains Hesse’s approach to literature selection (p. 217):

I am opposed in principle to excluding from the  
circle of my sympathy or at any rate of my interest  
any literature, school, or author

Hesse describes three stages of readers—each of us belonging to different groups at different times (p. 101). First is the naïve reader who “consumes a book as one consumes food”, reading until satiety (*ibid.*). The “book leads, the reader follows” (pp. 101–102). They may evaluate the novel’s events “according to their suspense, their danger, their erotic content, their splendor or misery”, or measure the writer “against aesthetic standards, which in the final analysis always remain arbitrary” (p. 102). The book of the naïve reader “is there simply and solely to be read faithfully and attentively and to be judged according to its content or its form” (*ibid.*).

The second type of reader has a “genius for play” and discounts the importance of the book’s substance or form (*ibid.*). Like children, they know that every object can have a multiplicity of meanings (pp. 102–3). Whereas the naïve reader follows the writer (“poet”) as “a horse obeys his driver”, this reader is a hunter pursuing prey: “a glimpse suddenly gained into what lies beyond the apparent freedom of the poet, into the poet’s compulsion and passivity, can enchant [the reader] more than all the elegance of good technique and cultivated style” (p. 103). In rejecting the notion that the poet has “free choice of material and form”, their “enjoyment consists in seeing not the material in the hands of his poet but the poet in the grip of his material” (*ibid.*).

The third type is the opposite of the “good” reader” (*ibid.*): so much an individual that they approach their books with perfect freedom (*ibid.*). Reading for neither education nor entertainment, they use a “book exactly like any other object in the world”: a stimulus (*ibid.*). Essentially it makes no difference to such a reader what they read (*ibid.*). Like a child

they find enjoyment and profit in playing with everything (p. 104). Finding something beautiful—a sentence, a truth, some wisdom—they experiment by turning it upside down. They know that every intellectual position has an equally valid opposite (*ibid.*) They highly value associative thinking, but don't restrict themselves to this mode (*ibid.*).

When we read in this way we can read whatever we like because, our imaginative and associative abilities being at their pinnacle, “we really no longer read what is printed on the paper but swim in a stream of impulses and inspirations that reach us from what we are reading” (*ibid.*). But at this stage the reader “is no longer a reader”. Remaining at this stage requires only one book: “a page with the letters of the alphabet” (p. 105). We can't permanently occupy this stage, but to be unacquainted with it is to be “an immature reader” (*ibid.*). Hesse recommends: (*ibid.*)

For just once in your life remain for an hour, a day at the third stage, the stage of not-reading-any-more. You will thereafter (it's so easy to slip back) be that much better a reader, that much better a listener and interpreter of everything written.

Until you recognise this, “you stand handicapped before every poet and thinker”: you conflate a small part with the whole and your interpretations are superficial (p. 106). This stage, “at which you are most yourself”, “will put an end to your reading”, yet until you know it intuitively, “you will never read any book...except as a schoolboy reads his grammar” (p. 107).

## **hooks, bell (1952-2021)**

hooks was an African-American theorist, educator, and social critic.

She grew up working class in a small town with rigid boundaries and a stifling atmosphere. Her father's reading—and more fundamentally, his literacy—kept him in touch with a world beyond this, offering the possibility of connecting with it (hooks 2010, 133). He gave her this gift by demonstrating that in “laying the foundation for a passion for words and ideas, reading made the impossible possible” (ibid.). hooks also learned from her father that it was more important to read critically than pursue formal, higher education (pp. 127–130). These intertwined themes of how the literacy we take for granted helps connect us to the world at large, and how reading critically can expand our consciousness, colours hook's lifetime of work on reading for social equality and civic engagement.

Reading and thinking critically, hooks relates, “helped me survive the traumas encountered in our patriarchal dysfunctional family setting” (p. 186). By reading with curiosity she gained the ability to conceive of a world other than that imposed on her by immediate circumstances—she was empowered to imagine rather than merely react (ibid.). Through the ability to place yourself in different time periods, different social structures, and different bodies, you come to see more possibilities for your own life. For her, “understanding the larger frame helped cultivate in me the seeds of mindful awareness and compassion” (ibid.). We can all benefit from literature in this way.

A critical reader and thinker longs to understand how the world works (p. 7). The practice involves “finding the answers to those eternal questions of the inquisitive child—and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most” (p. 9). It requires “radical openness”: a creative willingness to discover difficult truths (p. 187). This is an effortful stance, though, because by default we tend to defend and protect our viewpoints, ruling out the perspectives of others (p. 10). Here hooks is placing a demand on the reader; “radical openness” is no pleasant platitude.

We also often resist looking past the superficial truth of what we read (p. 9). It is comfortable to believe that we’re learning passively; the critical reader seeks “what matters most” by aiming to understand the underlying truth. They read with discernment by embracing the “joy and power” of intentional, active thinking (pp. 8–10). We become wiser when we learn to “reflect, to broaden our vision so that we can see the whole picture”, as hooks began to do when reading a child (p. 187).

This mindful reading fosters our ability to experience awe, by engaging our imagination (pp. 187–8). Openness to wonder transforms the ideas we encounter into sources of inspiration, aiding our struggle for radical openness. The point here is that it’s possible to read in such a way that these effects *don’t* materialise: if hooks as a little girl accepted that ideas were fixed and static, that the boundaries of her world were unshakeable, impregnable walls separating her powerless self from the wider world, she may have never left. When we remember that ideas are always subject to revision we are able to use what we read to transform the world in a positive fashion (p. 188). Reading



can “illuminate and heighten our sense of wonder, our recognition of the power of mystery” (ibid.).

Fiction, by demanding the use of our imagination, enables us to transpose ourselves into the world of the text. When hooks read Dickens as a child she felt herself “in harmony” with the characters (McLeod 1998, (quoted in)). She is disturbed by women who behave as if they can “only read women”, black people, black writers, or white students who believe that they “can only identify with a white writer” (ibid.). This is the path to losing sight of “the power of empathy and compassion” (ibid.).

Reading as a child, hooks found “an alternative sense of self and identity in the world of books” without thinking about race and writing (hooks 2010, 103). She explains (p. 104):

The only canons I formed in my mind were filled with the writers with whom I felt a soul inspiring resonance, the writers whose works were great to me because they gave me words, wisdom, and visions powerful enough to transform me and my world

It is important to critically “read works by authors who may be racist, sexist, engaged in class elitism, or homophobic” because openly addressing issues of diversity in this way encourages us to interrogate our biases, and reflect about how forces of discrimination dominate and intersect (p. 106). Refusing to read such authors would have constituted “a tremendous loss” to how hooks constructed her identity, how she conceived of herself (p. 108).

When approaching a work that was created in a context where

“prejudicial thinking was more accepted”, she suggests adopting an “awareness of multiple intentions” (p. 106). In this way we can separate the aspects of a work that speak to our soul from the discriminatory assumptions displayed elsewhere in the work (pp. 106–107). When she taught such books to students she “did not ignore or gloss over the prejudices and racial hatreds expressed...but neither did [she] make that the central focus of [their] critical reading” (p. 108). Her willingness to read such books depends on the larger context that they express; contemporary literature would be unlikely to warrant this treatment (p. 110).

Returning to what she learned from her father, hooks suggested creating community literacy programs in order to include marginalised women in feminism: literacy is “an important feminist agenda” (Olson 1994 (quoted in)). Lacking literacy, “newly born citizens of color, raised in homes where English may or may not be spoken” are “doomed to earning slave wages” (hooks 2010, 131). A person who lacks basic reading skills is unable to learn to their full capacity or fully participate in a democracy (p. 132):

We cannot be proper stewards of our environment, caring for self and the world, without the ability to read

Although a solitary act, “reading can actually be a part of the path to communion and community” (McLeod 1998). Thinkers like Malcolm X, hooks suggests, came to their spirituality and consciousness when they had the “solitude to read”—and, “tragically, like so many young black males, that solitude only came in prison” (ibid.). Academics and writers are accustomed to both having this solitude and

being able to discuss what they read, whereas most people lack a community of this type. Even lower quality books are valuable in this regard because it's the "storytelling that creates community" (ibid.). hooks proposes "camps, like summer camps, that grown people could go to where they could fellowship together with books" (ibid.).

Reading with radical openness allows us to break out of the rigidly delimited communities of our birth to form communities of our own which can lift their members up, and carry them beyond. But reading in this way is not a given. It is difficult as an adult to read with the curiosity of a child and engage critically with potentially uncomfortable and challenging material. In re-discovering, then practising, our ability to experience awe in books, in reading outside our everyday experiences, we find possibilities. In helping others acquire literacy and critical reading ability, we help ignite more inclusive civic engagement.

## **Jackson, Holbrook (1874-1948)**

Jackson was a British journalist, writer, publisher, and bibliophile.

Reading is the art of adjusting literature to life (Jackson 1946, 11), therefore the reader is an artist, and their creation, themselves. A book is “one of the media of an art as well as a work of art” (pp. 25–6):

Books properly understood and used should co-ordinate the experiences of reader and writer, producing a harmony out of two assertive forces, that of an author who says in effect, ‘I am,’ and of a reader who says... ‘I become’. But the reader does not become the author, he becomes himself.

Literature enables a reader to “more vividly and more satisfactorily” apprehend themselves than if left to their own devices, to see beyond what we’re in the habit of seeing (p. 25). The novelist sharpens our sense of observation, attuning us to characters we wouldn’t have noticed (p. 88). This requires the reader to involuntarily place themselves in the “attitude of the writer” without losing their identity: neither wholly absorbing the book nor following it implicitly (p. 27). The reader goes forth “from themselves and after a while they return home having gained something and lost something” (ibid.).

As an artist the reader requires an alertness of the senses, the mind, and the imagination (p. 11). They exercise these faculties by reading “in a controlled appreciation of a book” such that they participate in the aesthetic experience of the author

while distilling it into an aesthetic experience of their own (ibid.). Reading is a synthesis of these faculties concentrated by perception, and books yield their meaning to those who observe their facets and depths precisely (p. 85). The reader sees nothing unless they're continually honing their powers of observation (p. 108). Yet, art is inspiration plus technique minus consciousness of technique, so the reader must both develop this constant alertness but also have the ability to forget the technique and, ultimately, the book (pp. 254, 261). We must elevate this watchful stance to habit—so it becomes as natural and forgettable as our digestive process—so we almost lose consciousness of the words on the page.

To exercise our perceptive faculties we must read as writers, with our ears as well as our eyes, noticing “Rhythm, Symbolism, Allusion, Plot, Character, Mythology, Rhetoric, and Geography” (pp. 200, 110). To perceive how words sound, their rhythms and rhymes, we need to develop a “good ear” through “attentive listening” (pp. 115, 117, 110). In addition to the sense-values of words, phrases, and sentences, we must be attentive to their sound-values because these contribute to their meaning and our understanding (p. 110). Hearing the text is not an optional aspect of reading; without a good ear we are deaf to meaning.

Sensitivity to word-values is vital for both writer and reader because of the mutability of words (p. 122). The meaning of words is in constant flux, they're used in changing circumstances by changing people, so have lives of their own which have been constituted by these experiences (pp. 128, 122). Long after words and phrases lose their original meanings, we remain loyal because we, too, are conditioned by them (pp.

148–9). Words (pp. 122–3):

are keys with which we unlock doors of imagination and knowledge, and if writers use the wrong, or the misshapen word, or readers misinterpret the right word, the keys will not function and may even break the lock!

Jackson conceives reading as a game of hide-and-seek: as “readers seek and deny themselves in what they read”, writers “expose and disguise themselves in what they write” (pp. 198–9). We have seen how the reader as an artist both seeks themselves in what they read but also avoids surrendering their identity to the author. For the author, disguise can take the form of obscurity and ambiguity, with some feeling that being explicit is to condescend to the reader’s intelligence (p. 198). Their style “often disguises as much as it reveals” (p. 201). Reticence, diffidence, and understatement round out this bag of tricks (p. 197). The reader’s responsibility is to forbid such trickery to subdue them: “To be dominated by a book, even a good book, is like being bossed by a servant, or a canvasser—or a propagandist” (p. 203). To see through these disguises the reader acts as a detective, seeking to discover the ultimate essence of the writer’s meaning by working through the “triple meaning: what the writer said, what he thought he said, and what he meant to say” (p. 198).

Just as the writer disguises themselves, they also expose themselves in all of their methods (p. 204). The major literary forms are “largely autobiography” in that their authors felt an uncontrollable desire to project themselves in text for their own satisfaction (p. 152). Both writer and reader are egocentric: the reader seeks themselves and the writer projects themselves

(p. 163). A great novelist is more than a storyteller; their work profoundly expresses their attitude towards life—which is often more interesting than the story (pp. 212, 209). It is the writer's motives that most deeply affect the reader (p. 231).

Reading is a process of remembering just as much as observation. Books are valuable even if they only help us recall useful or happy memories that would otherwise have lain dormant (p. 109). Indeed, they rarely “put anything into the mind of a reader which is not already there” (p. 266). They make us conscious, or more deeply so, of what we already on some level possess “by stimulating apprehension, by smoothing or ruffling the surface of consciousness, and, in rare instances, by striking below the surface and opening the way to vision or revelation” (ibid.). Reading helps sharpen our observational skills, and the observations of the writer make us more deeply aware of our past observations, in a cycle of self-discovery.

At their best, books revitalise, and do so when they “express rather than inform”, connecting with us on an emotional level by forcing us to readjust ourselves to the experience of our contact with the writer (pp. 266, 14). This is a forcing, a clashing of opinions, rather than an immediate and harmonious adjustment: it startles our dormant consciousness into awaking (p. 14). Approving of the author may even be an impediment to benefiting from their book: a fit reader “may be charmed and disenchanted simultaneously” (p. 20).

“All reading is criticism”, but the fit reader criticises knowingly (p. 52). They never permit a critic to come between them and their book (p. 54). They become their own critic by neither siding with the writer nor ignoring the critic, but learning how criticism works and how it benefits: the critic is useful for their

point of view—"the more idiosyncratic the better"—and their opinions "should be resisted but not resented" (pp. 53–4). Criticism should be avoided that "confuses fashion with style" (p. 55):

Style is individual and innate, fashion common and imitative. One is the instinct of a person, the other the behaviour of a group

The fit reader reads to please themselves; they neither habitually follow fashion nor read what they ought (p. 11). Jackson doesn't advocate classics or reading what one is prescribed because this is likely to "to destroy an authentic gift for reading" (p. 10). Insisting upon reading only established masterpieces is misguided because "[t]he only hundred best books is the hundred that is best for you" (ibid.). Further, a "masterpiece is a truce not a victory, its acceptance as a classic ... being challenged at all stages of its history" (p. 255). A great book has the inexhaustible power "to revive, restore, or stimulate consciousness" such that you "find something worth pondering on every time you open it" (pp. 16, 50). Good reading has "depth rather than breadth", it's "concentrated rather than extensive": its quintessence is personal selection (pp. 15, 22). Reading well doesn't require classics, then, but nor does it require one to be "well read" (p. 22):

the well-read man is often one who has accumulated knowledge at the expense of imagination. He is a scholar not an artist, educated rather than experienced

Jackson recommends ruminative reading: "three parts gloating, dreaming, pondering upon the thing read" (pp. 16, 28):



Every sensitive reading of the kind should be followed by a feeling of satisfaction and reluctance to take up another book. We are content to brood on our new experience and to resent, for the time being, interference with what seems to be an established state of mind.

To appreciate a book is to read it “with something of the quality that went to its making”: “a book is not read until the reader becomes its equal” (p. 28).

## Johnson, Samuel (1709-1784)

Johnson was an English writer and lexicographer.

Reading should be pleasurable because otherwise what is read is quickly forgotten. Pleasure attracts our attention, and the art of attention is the “true art of memory”. We forget material toward which we are inattentive, so books read out of necessity or in an impatient mood are seldom memorable (Johnson 1825a, 370). Ideally, then, we read what we want when we want, but otherwise, before taking up a book we must evacuate and calm our mind: if we bring to our reading a turbid, impure, agitated mind, we will not be attentive (ibid.). Johnson asks: “If the repositories of thought are already full, what can they receive?” (ibid.). If we are distracted or read without inclination, we read in vain (Boswell, 637).

An implication of this principle is that we shouldn’t feel compelled to finish reading books which we cease to enjoy. A biographer reports him remarking: “Alas, Madam! ...How few books are there of which one can ever possibly arrive at the *last* page” (Piozzi 1932, 179–180). He rejected the notion that books should be read in their entirety once begun (Boswell, 1116):

This is surely a strange advice; you may as well resolve that whatever men you happen to get acquainted with, you are to keep them for life. A book may be good for nothing; or there may be only one thing in it worth knowing; are we to read it all through?

Referring to an essay he stopped reading: “when I take up the end of a web, and find it packthread, I do not expect, by

looking further, to find embroidery” (p. 355). When describing Forster’s *Voyage to the South Seas*: “he makes me turn over many leaves at a time”, i.e. Johnson began to skim a book that was losing his interest before casting it aside (pp. 734–5).

Johnson rejected the concept popular at the time of copying long quotations into a commonplace-book<sup>9</sup> because the original book could just be consulted again (Johnson 1825a, 369–370). This approach merely wastes time without assisting memory (p. 370). Writing distracts our reading, so “what is read twice is commonly better remembered than what is transcribed” (pp. 369–370). Again, then, by prioritising pleasure we remain attentive to what we read, which aids our ability to remember it, so we can avoid needing to make lengthy transcriptions, which in turn makes the experience more pleasurable.

It is preferable to read from “immediate inclination” (Boswell, 742). “Dr. Johnson”, his companion and biographer related, “advised me to-day, to have as many books about me as I could; that I might read upon any subject upon which I had a desire for instruction at the time” (ibid.). By uniting our curiosity with the opportunity to satisfy it, we learn best. If we lack a desire for any particular topic, we should prescribe ourselves one, but hopefully an attitude of curiosity will result which will render this practice unnecessary (ibid.).

Reading is pleasurable, then, when it satisfies a particular desire or curiosity, and as long as this state is maintained the process can continue. Johnson gives us permission to read according to our inclinations—trusting our instincts by monitoring

---

<sup>9</sup>See Locke, John

our attention and mood. This attitude helps ensure that our attention remains on the text, and therefore that what is read is remembered and connected to what we already know.

We should generally read to attain practical knowledge. Otherwise, we may learn to reason rather than live: appreciating the author's style and argument, criticising and disputing with nuance, while disregarding the chief use of the book: to affect our minds and reform our lives (Johnson, 197; Johnson 1968, 276). To gain wisdom from reading we must take responsibility for improving our understanding: "He that reads and grows no wiser seldom suspects his own deficiency; but complains of hard words and obscure sentences, and asks why books are written which cannot be understood" (Johnson 1825b, 357). To gain practical or moral improvement in this way requires one to actually "apply any general reproof of vice to themselves, or try their own manners by axioms of justice"; otherwise we may remember these virtuous principles but not improve our conduct (Johnson, 197).

This is not to say that one must always read for this reason. With slight irony Johnson remarks: "The author is not wholly useless, who provides innocent amusements...he who keeps men in a neutral state, may be justly considered as a benefactor to life" (Johnson 1968, 277). Imaginative literature can excel by its "allurement and delight", as it clearly did for Johnson, the author of the four-volume *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (2010, 481). By implication, though, if a reader wants more than amusement from their reading, they must pursue books disposed toward self-improvement (Johnson 1968, 276). Further, regardless of our disposition, if we read worthwhile titles, they inevitably influence us because (p.

277):

we cannot at pleasure obliterate ideas: he that reads books of science, though without any fixed desire of improvement, will grow more knowing; he that entertains himself with moral or religious treatises, will imperceptibly advance in goodness; the ideas which are often offered to the mind, will at last find a lucky moment when it is disposed to receive them

In any case, we require intellectual humility so “should remember the diffidence of Socrates, and repair by his candour the injuries of time” (Johnson 1825c, 31–32). When an ancient author seems defective, or their sense dubious, we should assume they are intelligent and their expression was once forcible.

Lastly, although we should read for pleasure, we shouldn’t expect the practice to necessarily be always pleasant (Johnson, 356):

Literature is a kind of intellectual light, which, like the light of the sun, may sometimes enable us to see what we do not like; but who would wish to escape unpleasing objects, by condemning himself to perpetual darkness?

## **Jonson, Ben (1572-1637)**

Jonson was an English playwright and poet.

Books are often our best teachers because they do not threaten or challenge our self interests as a living teacher might. We should look to ancient authors, but not by making them dictators: they have “opened the gates, and made the way, that went before us; but as Guides, not Commanders” (Jonson 1953, 54–5). In reading we should “calmly study the separation of opinions, find the errors have intervened, awake Antiquity, call former times into question; but make no parties with the present” (p. 55). We must also turn this critical, disinterested attitude on our own judgements and motives to identify the prejudices and expectations we bring to the text. In this way our first obligation is neither to the author nor ourselves, but to knowledge and truth.

Reading in itself was unimportant to Jonson; his interest was the many uses to which it could be put. His process of self-education through reading was a project of self-fashioning—establishing social status and self-worth. It inspired his literary career but also provided him with authorities to legitimise his artistic decisions. Reading was not a passive escape from the world for him but a way of entering and responding to it. He realised the interdependence of knowledge and power: “Learning needs rest: Sovereignty gives it. Sovereignty needs counsel: Learning affords it” (p. 75).

This study was vigorous and mentally demanding, yet relaxation was important, too, because “The mind is like a Bow, the stronger for being unbent” (p. 40). The variety of making “diverse studies, at diverse hours” helps “refresh, and repair us

... As when a man is weary of writing, to read; and then again of reading, to write” (p. 39). The reader should be akin to “an explorer, with all the distinction, excitement, hard work, and sacrifice the comparison implies” (Evans 1995, 25 (quoted in)).

The educated reader benefits society, and, indeed, reading was not an entirely private activity for Jonson. It could set a social precedent in terms of the material read displaying the reader’s manners and character. His culture was “essentially oral and public”—“print had not yet made reading an entirely private act”—so public reading and listening could become socially competitive, self-serving performances to enhance one’s character—sometimes by misrepresenting the author (ibid.). In *Inviting a Friend to Supper*, Jonson presents a positive example of reading in community (Jonson 1988, 70):

Shall read a piece of Virgil, Tacitus,  
Livy, or of some better book to us,  
Of which we’ll speak our minds, amidst our meat

Evans glosses: “Physical and intellectual nourishment are juxtaposed... The words of ancient authors stimulate new thoughts, and the occasion of social reading becomes a spur to individual self-expression” (1995, 45).

In another poem, *To the Same*, a man is praised for a “well-made choice of friends, and book” and for “making thy friends books, and thy books friends” (Jonson 1988, 61). Both friends and books required reading and interpreting, and could be approached in similar, profitable ways, and the judgement that one displays in their choice of books and friends speaks to their character.

In *To the Reader* Jonson writes (p. 35):

Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book in hand.

To read it well: that is, to understand

This importance he places on the reader's judgement was also expressed in the dedication of his comedy *Epicoene; Or, The Silent Woman*: "Read therefore, I pray you, and censure" (Jonson 1966, 3). We should judge a book with a combination of assertiveness and humility, because in judgement we reveal our own character, opening ourselves to judgement. To strive to "read it well" the reader does credit to the book and themselves, and takes care because "only a careful reading—one that scrutinizes his own motives and reactions as closely as the book—will produce true understanding" (Evans 1995, 38).



## **Locke, John (1632-1704)**

Locke was an English philosopher and physician.

Reading is a necessary, yet not principal, part of study; the other parts being reflection and conversation (King 1929, 107). The role of reading in study is for amassing the raw material for knowledge, much of which will be found to be useless (p. 108).

The proper end of study is practical, so studying for the sake of studying is mere recreation (p. 90). It follows, then, that to study history for only the reputation it brings, or the works of a classic author to become a master of them, is idle and empty (p. 94). It may be useful to study “languages and criticisms, history and antiquity, strange opinions and odd speculations”, but not as our primary aim, for they are liable to waste our time (p. 95). We should study to make use of what we learn.

A related mistake is to collect borrowed mass of arguments from books in order to recite them upon occasion (pp. 103–4). This may make us appear learned initially, but in dialogue—when tested—we will be found otherwise: it makes one a superficially impressive talker but not an able person (p. 103). Instead, we should endeavour to fully understand the topic in itself (*ibid.*). This requires the ideas to be fixed in the mind, rather than committed to our fallible memory (*ibid.*). When we grasp concepts in the abstract—as opposed to quotations and other people’s phrasing—arguments are naturally suggested to us (p. 104). In this way we are able to debate ably even under pressure.

Our duty is to impartially seek truth. This is commonly agreed, but less commonly achieved because of how “opin-

ions come to be settled and fixed in men's minds...seldom questioned or examined by those who entertain them" (p. 101). This causes a student to flatter themselves that they aim to understand the truth in their reading, when they actually just succeed in confirming their prior opinions and convictions (ibid.). We must examine and meditate upon such prejudices, these ancient, near sacred opinions, so that we can free our minds for truth (p. 102).

That our mind is prepossessed by "received and beloved opinions" is why Locke suggests that reading should be combined with conversations with "a serious and sober friend", who may help us calmly examine them (ibid.). Such conversation "may perhaps let into the mind as much improvement of knowledge, though with less prejudice to the health, as settled solemn poring over books" (p. 97).

When we do read, we should read only the best authors in our chosen subject because reading bad books not only wastes our time but can cause us to regress in our study: our heads may be filled with such false notions that we are further from truth than a person who is perfectly ignorant (p. 107).

In studying a subject we should consider what constitutes proof in its domain and what type of evidence we will consider sufficient (p. 106). Otherwise, we may be led into scepticism despite having all the proof we can rationally demand. We also need to have an appropriate grasp of the trustworthiness of our judgement: neither believing that we can understand everything, nor believing ourselves unable to comprehend anything (pp. 104–5). We are "finite creatures, furnished with powers and faculties very well fitted to some purposes, but very disproportionate to the vast and unlimited extent of

things” (p. 105).

Likewise, we should study with the duration and intensity proportionate to our temper and strength, considering our general dispositions and health, as well as the circumstances in which we work (p. 97). Risking one’s health for this labour, aiming to become more useful through intense, excessive study, risks depriving us of “the abilities and opportunities of doing that good we might have done with a meaner talent” (pp. 96–7). Our studies must also accord with our mental disposition, so rather than trying to force our mind to comply with our study plans, we are generally better off following its bent and tendency—working with our nature (p. 98). This is not only a more efficient long-term strategy but also improves the chance of the material making a clearer, deeper impression on one’s mind (pp. 98–9).

Locke employed common-place books: carefully indexed collections of excerpts quotations from his reading, which he then re-assembled in his writing. He also suggested drawing out and keeping before us a scheme of the subjects we study, an intellectual map which serves “like a regular chest of drawers, to lodge these things orderly, and in the proper places, which came to hand confusedly, and without any method at all” (p. 107). Ideally this ontology should closely resemble the nature and order of our topic. This aids memory and clarity of thought, as Locke explains (pp. 106–7):

though I have changed often the subject I  
have been studying, read books by patches and  
accidentally, as they have come in my way, and  
observed no method nor order in my studies,  
yet making now and then some little reflection

upon the order of things as they are, or at least I  
have fancied them to have in themselves, I have  
avoided confusion in my thoughts

## Lowell, James Russell (1819-1891)

Lowell was an American Romantic poet and critic.

Being able to read allows “us to see with the keenest eyes, hear with the finest ears, and listen to the sweetest voices of all time...it annihilates time and space for us” (Lowell 1887, 115). We gain admittance for the asking to a “select society of all the centuries”: a world of thought, fancy, and imagination (pp. 115–6).

Our visible world is at best the “husk and symbol” of the spiritual world which the society of books seeks to express ideally (p. 110). Similarly, the world in which we truly live is so small when represented by our senses, as opposed to our mental world of memory and imagination (p. 111). Our minds are peopled with the historical and the fictional, but why are the former considered more real than the latter (ibid.)? “Do not serious and earnest men discuss Hamlet as they would Cromwell or Lincoln?” (ibid.). The society of books is a real world for Lowell (p. 110).

He rejects the notion that Shakespeare left us a less useful legacy than James Watt (p. 129). The love and study of imaginative literature helps us maintain a healthy balance of our character and faculties; a bulwark against materialism (pp. 128–9). The world of imagination isn’t one of “abstraction and nonentity”; it’s “formed out of chaos by a sense of the beauty...the realm of Might-be, our haven of refuge from the shortcomings and disillusion of life” (p. 128).

In our material world only “the earth and what is immovably attached to it” is *real* property (pp. 109–110). However, we can be stripped of those, whereas the “riches of scholarship,

the benignities of literature...are beyond the reach of thief or moth or rust" (p. 110). These riches aren't heritable, so we can share and distribute them, yet never be alienated (ibid.).

Few people learn the highest use of books (p. 118). The most important part of our education is that which we give ourselves, and the first lesson is that reading well requires us to discriminate between literature and merely printed material (p. 116). Books either beckon us upward, or drag us down, giving their own nature to our mind (p. 118). We should choose, therefore, books which make our minds think, not relax, which requires that we judge them (ibid.).

Ignoring this injunction results in "desultory reading" (ibid.). This may constitute a profitable waste of a time when pursued as a pastime, but will not result in a full person (pp. 118, 122). Especially when done unconsciously it "hebetates the brain and slackens the bow-string of Will", communicating to us "as little intelligence as the messages that run along the telegraph wire to the birds that perch on it" (p. 118).

We spend as much time reading as scholars of many centuries past, but often marvel at their scholarship and "certain dignity of phrase" (p. 119). Lowell suggests that they were scholars because they read fewer books than us, but the books that they did read were the best (pp. 119-120). They communed with the choice thoughts of great authors, unconsciously acquiring the manner of this grand society, whereas we "diligently inform ourselves...of such inspiring facts as that a horse belonging to Mr. Smith ran away on Wednesday" (p. 120). In attending to trivial news rather than great works we risk becoming "mere sponges saturated from the stagnant goosepond of village gossip" (ibid.).

Works of genius can't be adequately translated (pp. 125–6). Reading by translation is more hasty and superficial, but, properly used, translations reduce the time and effort of acquiring knowledge so “add as many years to our lives as they subtract from the processes of our education” (p. 126). Practising translation ourselves is useful for studying languages, especially in how it improves our style and expression in our native language (pp. 126–7). Forcing us to deliberate over the best foreign word to express one with which we're familiar teaches us greater precision of language, therefore greater precision of thought. Lowell suggests that if we enjoy reading a translated work, we should consider learning the language in which it was first written in order to appreciate the original text (*ibid.*). Translations, then, are expedient but also encouragements to language learning.

We should read either the great books in whatever literature we're interested in, or become thoroughly familiar with one great author (p. 121). To understand this reading we become “gradually and pleasantly persuaded to excursions and explorations of which you little dreamed when you began” (*ibid.*). Because all roads lead both to and away from Rome, this journey also teaches us how to weigh vital books (*ibid.*). We almost accidentally become scholars, which is far superior to tedious “scholarship for the mere sake of scholarship” (*ibid.*). That is, we should develop a definite aim for our study organically rather than adhering to a formal course (*ibid.*). This better focuses our attention, improving our memory, such that the knowledge we acquire “groups and arranges itself in an order that is lucid, because everywhere and always it is in intelligent relation to a central object of constant and growing interest” (pp. 121–2). It forcefully impresses upon us “the

necessity of thinking”, so helps achieve the true end of learning: to quicken our intelligence and widen “our intellectual sympathies”—“knowledge” (p. 122).



## Mendelsund, Peter (1968-)

Peter Mendelsund is a novelist, painter, and graphic designer.

Reading is “a story of pictures, and of *picturing*” (Mendelsund 2014, 8). We first learn to read with picture books, then chapter books with pictures, then “graduate to books made up entirely of words”. Do “we also need, over time, to learn how to picture narratives unassisted”? (pp. 190–1) How can we better imagine and visualise what we read?

One way is to sketch the characters and locations as we’re reading about them “in an attempt to clarify, stabilize, and make fast” the impressions you’re building up (p. 175). This encourages you to pay attention to relevant textual cues and intentionally visualise, but also to savour the phenomenological aspects of the author’s world. Similarly, the physical space, the geography of the book’s settings and locations can be mapped as you read. This isn’t an artistic rendering, but more like an architectural plan on a napkin: “a set of guidelines” for the text’s world. Our “mental maps”, say, of a house described in a novel “govern the actions of its occupants” (p. 232). Mendelsund also recommends annotating non-fiction books by underlining the big ideas so that they can be seen at a glance when you re-read them. (Mendelsund and King 2014)

We can listen to how novels tell us to read them. Mendelsund explains (Mendelsund 2014, 125):

From a novel I assemble a series of rules—not only a methodology for reading (a suggested hermeneutics) but a manner of cognition, all of which carries me through the text (and sometimes lingers after a book ends). The

author teaches me how to imagine, as well as when to imagine, and how much.

Put another way, “[c]haracter traits are also instructions for use” (p. 127). In genre fiction, we’re familiar with these rules because they’re typically the rules of the genre, but perhaps part of the challenge of more literary fiction is noticing and applying these hints?

The content of our imagination is often “untethered from the author’s text” (p. 294). We interpret but also let our minds wander in a process that “is loosely associative” but “not random” (ibid.). All of the physical forms the characters of Anna Karenina or Ishmael have taken in readers’ minds differ, but are related (p. 258). The text incites us to imagine in certain ways, but leaves a lot of details unsaid. In general, characters are “physically vague”: their “features help to delineate their boundaries”, but don’t aid our visualisation (p. 30). It is this absence of elucidation, characters as ciphers, that excites our imaginations: narratives are enriched by omission because we fill in the gaps (pp. 30–1). We should attend, therefore, to the text’s prompts while making the character ours. We don’t, and can never, see what “the author pictured when writing a particular book”, so should exhibit our agency as co-creator of the work (pp. 207, 197). For instance, Mendelsund suggests that we “colonize books with our familiars and we exile, repatriate the characters to lands we are more acquainted with” (p. 211). He reads about a dock, for example, and substitutes his memory of a dock from childhood: this makes the author’s image far more vivid, but also utterly personal for Mendelsund (p. 300). This is the only way the activity of reading can work: novels are “meant to be transposed; imaginatively translated.

Associatively translated.” (p. 207).

Does the appearance of specific characters matter, though? Throughout *Madame Bovary*, Emma’s eye colour changes, but this doesn’t seem to be significant (p. 44). However, the ears of Anna Karenina’s husband “grow in proportion to his wife’s disaffection with him”, telling us nothing of the husband’s appearance, but much about Anna’s feelings towards him (p. 36). The features of a character can “contribute to their meaning” (p. 34).

Our images of characters are not formed immediately: “[a]ll books open in doubt and dislocation” (p. 60). As we read we are “ever reviewing and reconsidering our mental portraits of characters...: amending them, backtracking to check on them, updating them when new information arises” (p. 41). In general, “much of our reading takes place in such a suspension of meaning”: we read “seemingly meaningful sentences without knowing their referents” (p. 121). Yet when we remember a book, we don’t remember making these little adjustments; we remember it “as if we had watched the movie” (p. 53). What does it mean that “our memory of reading is a false memory” (p. 9)?

We use metaphors of films and cameras to describe reading perhaps because we’re terrified that “we can’t recapitulate the world in perfect facsimile”, but thinking about books in this way contradicts our actual experience (p. 345). It is why some readers despair at their memory or capacity for concentration when they’re unable to recall aspects of a novel—if our memories are video recorders, our failures of recollection prove that our minds are deficient. Instead, we should realise that the practice of reading is like “consciousness itself: imperfect,

partial; hazy; co-creative” (p. 403). As our visions of books become more authentic they become less intimate (p. 206). Verisimilitude in this context is a chimera because we read as we see the world: by picturing and “making reductions”, and therefore creating meaning (p. 415). As co-creators of narratives, we should prefer our sketches to verisimilitude “because the sketches, at least, are ours” (p. 198). Realising how we apprehend the world helps us form a more realistic notion of remembering what we read that avoids striving for photographic, cinematographic memories, assuming that our memories are accurate, or ceeding too much importance to the text.

Perhaps it’s better to think about reading a book in terms of plays rather than films? For example, we see Hamlet as more of a role than a character, and Denmark as a set. Hamlet is clearly meant to be inhabited—performed—and the set can be where the director imagines it to be. We perform the books read while attending the performance (p. 214). How does our reading change if we see characters as roles and locations and sets, consider all the ways a play can differ from its text, and conceive that we’re both co-creating the production and watching it? What would this book look like on stage?

Or should we see books as roads along which readers travel? Some we drive, some we walk. How does the speed at which we travel affect our journey, our ability to observe our surroundings, and our imagining of what we read (p. 96)? Certain books seem made for brisk reading “details are scant, and what details there are appear drab—but the velocity and torque of the narrative is exhilarating” (ibid.). In others, the trajectory of the narrative matters far less than

“the vistas” they might afford (*ibid.*). Mendulsund prefers to read through a book quickly but be forced to “pull over” on occasion and marvel (*ibid.*). The best books are “meant to be reread”: “The first time through, I can tear along, as fast as possible, and then later, I’ll enjoy a leisurely stroll—so that I can see what I’ve missed” (*ibid.*).

We also consider slowing down when the novel reaches “a confusing juncture”, where we wonder if we’ve been paying insufficient attention (p. 119). We’re faced with a dilemma: “to go backwards and revisit earlier passages, or to press on” (*ibid.*). Should we backtrack and “turn back the pages in an attempt to find the components of the story we’ve been missing” or “just continue reading, bracketing our ignorance and suspending resolution” (pp. 119–120)? Does the drama take precedence over the details? Mendelsund is interested in what we imagine “when we have lost the narrative thread in a story, when we breeze past words we don’t understand, when we read words without knowing to what they refer” (p. 121). When modulating our reading speed and seeking re-orientation, we should at least be aware that “[w]e can read without seeing, and we can also read without understanding” (*ibid.*).

We’re taught to see past words, “to look at what the words and letterforms point toward” (p. 322). Like arrows, words both are something and point toward something. Likewise, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and whole works are arrows (pp. 330–2). Where are they pointing? We’re habituated to look only in the direction the arrow indicates, but what if we looked at the arrow itself, or in a more imaginative direction?

We can also choose to look past the pictorial—opt out of effortful visualisation—in preference to the conceptual content

(p. 205):

If we don't have pictures in our minds when we read, then it is the interaction of ideas—the intermingling of abstract relationships—that catalyzes feeling in us readers. This sounds like a fairly unenjoyable experience, but, in truth, this is also what happens when we listen to music. This relational, nonrepresentational calculus is where some of the deepest beauty in art is found. Not in mental pictures of things, but in the play of elements... (p. 245)

Whether he finds beauty in the visual, imaginary world that he co-creates with the text, or experiences this conceptual interplay, what Mendelsund often learns from books is compassion and to be kinder. Reading “compels one to enter other minds and hearts, which should in turn lead to some kind of empathetic maturation in the reader” (Mendelsund and Kroeter 2014). Reading is “a method for learning about the lives of others, for inhabiting these lives” (ibid.).

But it can be hard to make time for these reading experiences. Mendelsund often reads before bed and in “stolen moments” throughout the day (Mendelsund and King 2014). For reading to just happen like this, ebooks are helpful. Despite being very visually orientated, and a cover designer, he reads “sixty to seventy percent” of his books on electronic devices (ibid.). With print books, your memory of reading is predicated on events that “take place geographically on the page” and the “haptic aspect of how deep you are into the reading experience as you hold the book—that it gets thicker in your left hand as it gets thinner in your right hand” (ibid.). This is ab-

sent in ebooks, but they do allow you to “look things up easily” and are “miraculous” when it comes to reading on public transport (ibid.). There isn’t “even a trade off” between these mediums; they’re “totally different experiences” (ibid.). The medium changes the way Mendelsund views the book as an artifact, but not the way he imagines: “Text, if it’s doing its job, is transparent” (ibid.).

## Miller, Henry (1891-1980)

Miller was an American novelist and essayist.

The works found in lists of “best books” do not constitute our intellectual or cultural foundations. Rather, each of us must dig our foundations, decide for ourselves which material, which elements of culture are allowed to influence us and shape our characters and lives (H. Miller 1969, 32). We should begin not with classics, then, but with books from our own time—those concerning the world in which we live. We can learn from our contemporaries what past literature is worthwhile, and the good reader will naturally gravitate to the good books (*ibid.*).

A book lives, therefore, “through the passionate recommendation of one reader to another”; without this enthusiastic reader breathing “spirit into other readers”, the book dies (pp. 22, 28). Books should always be circulating, lent and borrowed as much as possible (p. 23). In this way, books are not only friends but ways of making friends and deepening friendships (*ibid.*). And friends are better at suggesting titles to which we’re receptive (p. 53). Many classics, for example, “cannot begin to be understood and appreciated until one has lived and thought for himself” (p. 123). Having finished a book he liked, Miller wrote laudatory letters to friends, associates, potential publishers, and anybody else he could think of (p. 55). We have a responsibility to perpetuate the books we find important, rather than just laying them aside—in a deep sense reading is a creative act, sustaining and continuing the author’s work (p. 28).

However, we inspire resistance in our interlocutors when



we praise a book too much—we should not seek to meddle with another's destiny through heavy-handed insistence (pp. 32, 55). Our own resistance to books can bury them, make them unapproachable, because of the walls of prejudice we've erected in terms of their subject, style or "unfortunate associations" (pp. 29–30). An example for Miller was *Wuthering Heights*, which "through pride and prejudice" he almost missed reading because he assumed that "it was impossible for an English novel—by a woman!—to be that good" (p. 31). It took a recommendation by one friend, then later another friend giving him a copy before he read it in one sitting, and was left astounded by its power and beauty (ibid.). Recommendations can plant a seed in their recipients, but they require subtlety and patience to succeed.

Miller learned that the hardest part of life is learning "to do only what is strictly advantageous to one's welfare, strictly vital" (p. 23). Accordingly, we should read as little, not as much, as possible (ibid.). He had not needed to read even a tenth of what he did (ibid.). Further, his slavish reading left him fearful of recovering his own voice as a writer (p. 198). To live wisely and fully, we should prefer to experience life directly rather than mediated by a book (p. 31). He proposes: (p. 23)

When you stumble upon a book you would like to read, or think you ought to read, leave it alone for a few days. But think about it as intensely as you can. Let the title and the author's name revolve in your mind. Think what you yourself might have written had the opportunity been yours. Ask yourself earnestly if it be absolutely necessary to add this work to your store of

knowledge or your fund of enjoyment. Try to imagine what it would mean to forego this extra pleasure or enlightenment. Then, if you find you must read the book, observe with what extraordinary acumen you tackle it. Observe, too, that however stimulating it may be, very little of the book is really new to you. If you are honest with yourself you will discover that your stature has increased from the mere effort of resisting your impulses.

He suggests that we meditate on free time—keeping our minds open, rather than abusing books to escape our thoughts—and resume reading only if this proves unfruitful (pp. 265–6, 268–9, 276, 283). When we do read, we should ask ourselves if we are “stronger, wiser, happier, nobler, more contented beings” (p. 276)? Miller contends that we will not be but that we must discover this ourselves (*ibid.*).

Before beginning to write, reading for Miller “was nothing more than a narcotic, stimulating at first but depressing and paralyzing afterwards”, “the most voluptuous and the most pernicious of pastimes” (p. 34). To hone his craft he began reading in a cold-blooded and analytical fashion the books that had previously worked magic on him, analysing and deconstructing his favourite authors in order to understand how they enchanted him (pp. 34, 40). This didn’t diminish his enjoyment of reading, however, because a mark of a great book is that it can be reread “with no rupture of the original spell” (p. 48). This process was educational, but Miller decided that instead of wondering about these things we should listen to what the author has to say, and let their words

move us, alter us, and make us more and more what we truly are (p. 35).

Writing makes us better readers because the “most important factor in the appreciation of any art is the practice of it” (ibid.). The more Miller wrote his own books the more he read his favourite authors with “the right and the left eye”: he understood “what others are trying to tell me in their books” and became more tolerant, lenient, and understanding (p. 36).

Miller annotated extensively the books he liked, partly so when he rediscovered them he was reminded of his opinions and reactions (p. 26). He copied out long passages from some books, often placing them above his door “so that, in leaving, my friends would be sure to read them” (pp. 27–28). This was a way of spreading ideas and books, like his practice of passionate recommendations; it wasn’t a means of remembering. Miller only wished to preserve “the Proustian sort” of memory: “The flavor, the savor, the aroma, the ambience, as well as the value or non-value of a thing, I never forget” (p. 27). Rather than striving to remember, “it is important to cultivate a ‘forgettery’”: “When I really wish to recall something I can, though it may take considerable time and effort. I know quietly that nothing is lost” (ibid.).

Miller read highly-focused attention and concentration, directing all of his faculties to the task: what he read “soaked through”. He never read to kill time (p. 265). “Don’t read in order to divert your mind from the business at hand,” he counsels: “What the autonomic system likes, what it responds to, is thorough concentration...Whatever you do, tackle it with a free mind and a clear conscience” (p. 268).

The only valid reason to read should be our enjoyment: to “be stimulated to greater, higher activity and richer being” (p. 274). To enjoy a book, to extract from it what is vital, requires us to be fully awake when we read (p. 123). This attitude allows us to enjoy whatever comes into our experience and profit fully; we deceive ourselves when we *seek* to profit from books (ibid.).

When we read an exciting, compelling book that feels insightful and interesting, we tend to read it briskly (p. 131). When “we stumble on a...stimulating and provocative” portion, we “stifle and suppress our thoughts, pretending that we will return to them when we have finished the book. We never do, of course” (ibid.). Instead, we would find the experience much more enriching and instructive “if we proceeded at a snail’s pace” (ibid.).

## Miller, J. Hillis (1928-2021)

Miller was a literary critic and professor of English.

A work of literature is a “portable dreamweaver” which generates alternative realities that re-enter the real world by means of the readers who were changed by the experience: it is “a use of words that makes things happen by way of its readers” (J. H. Miller 2002, 20). Literature’s strange ability to create worlds in this way can inspire an unconscious fear in us, which we try to appease by seeing it as realised in the real world (p. 33). We may try to demonstrate that a work is characteristic of the class, gender, and race of its author, argue that it’s typical of the historical context, interpret it as of the material and social world, or relate it to conceptual generalisations of how literary language works (ibid.). Miller objects to these approaches because each literary work is incomparable: it creates a singular, sui generis reality. It doesn’t set forth a universal truth, and is neither referential or mimetic. Instead (pp. 34–35):

Each work is closed in on itself, separated even from its author. The work is also separated from the “real world” and from any unified supernal world which all works might be presumed to put to work.

Traditionally, the authority of a book came from its author: knowledge of the author was thought to bring you an understanding of the work (pp. 102, 104). But when each text is sui generis, the work authorises itself (pp. 112–3). When Miller read *The Swiss Family Robinson* as a child, for example, it “acted on” him “to open up a meta-reality reachable in no other way and impossible to account for fully by its author’s

designs or by any other feature of the reading act's context" (p. 113). The work worked on him despite his ignorance of its author and historical context (*ibid.*). Miller is asking us to accept literature's "true strangeness" rather than engage in these attempts at appeasement. We don't need to know about the author or historical context, and attempting to do so might pull us away from the actual text, muting its power.

These literary worlds of imagination, these alternative realities are not merely available for us to inhabit; entering them requires "a tacit decision to commit all one's powers to bringing the work into existence as an imaginary space within oneself" (p. 38). This commitment implies that we accept the "particular rules" of the book, and accept that we can know this reality only by what the book tells us—there is no illuminating outside source (p. 39). Reading generates curiosity, "but literature keeps its secrets" as "an essential feature" (p. 40).

It seems unnecessary to teach somebody with basic literacy to read, but how they should develop into a good reader is unclear (p. 115). Miller identifies a "talent for irony" as a requisite to the extent that a reader blind to irony has similarities with the illiterate reader in their incomprehension (pp. 115–116). Further, there exists an "aporia of reading": Miller's two, "not easily reconcilable", prescriptions for reading literature (p. 118).

The first is that we must give our "whole mind, heart, feelings, and imagination" to the task of recreating the reality of the book within ourselves, solely on the basis of its words (pp. 118, 120). This "takes much mental, emotional, and even physical energy" and requires an "innocent, childlike abandonment to the act of reading, without suspicion, reservation, or interro-

gation" (pp. 119–120). To successfully generate the virtual reality the work offers to create we cannot "linger too long over the words", lest they lose their power to act as windows on the unknown; we must read "rapidly, allegro, in a dance of the eyes across the page" (pp. 120–121).

However, good reading is also slow, "lento": we read well when "nothing in a text is lost" (p. 122). The lento reader is "suspicious at every turn, interrogating every detail of the work...attending not to the new world that is opened up by the work, but to the means by which that opening is brought about" (ibid.). This critical reading takes two forms. Rhetorical reading "means a close attention to the linguistic devices by which the magic is wrought: observations of how figurative language is used, of shifts in point of view, of that all-important irony" (pp. 122–123). Another form, cultural criticism, involves an "interrogation of the way a literary work inculcates beliefs about class, race, or gender relations", which it presents as objectively true but are in fact ideological (p. 123).

Both types of critique deprive the literary work, for given readers, of the sovereign power it has over them when read allegro (p. 126). This critical reading has "contributed to the death of literature" (ibid.). Yet in demystifying literature we seek knowledge in itself, and perform a "hygienic or defensive" function of preventing people becoming unwillingly, and possibly detrimentally, enchanted or mystified (pp. 124–5, 159). The innocent, allegro reading is still necessary, however, to provide what we come to resist and criticise (p. 159).

The aporia of reading, then, is that the innocent and demystified way of reading each prevent the other from working; they

“go counter to one another” (p. 124). Miller suggests: “you must read in both ways at once, impossibly” (p. 159).



## Montaigne, Michel de (1533-1592)

Montaigne was a French philosopher and essayist.

He read for amusement, but mainly to learn how to live and die well (Montaigne 1980, 297, 300). He read for knowledge of himself, not things (p. 296). To this end, he was also curious about the “the soul and the natural judgements of [his] authors” and sought knowledge of mankind in general but tended to bring this understanding back to reflecting on himself (pp. 302–3, 821–2):

I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics.

He read only when bored: one hour spent on a particular book was a lot for him (p. 301). He approached books with gaiety, valuing knowledge but thinking it not worth the cost to strenuously rack his brain over (p. 297). When encountering difficulties in comprehension, he did not doggedly persevere at the task—persistence would rob him of his gaiety—but made one or two attempts, took a break, then perhaps returned to it at another time. He analogised his approach: “just as in order to judge the lustre of a scarlet fabric, they tell us to pass our eyes over it several times, catching it in various quickly renewed and repeated glimpses” (ibid.). If one book wearied him, he took up another (ibid.). If he persisted, he knew that he’d see less, losing both time and himself: “continuation and too strong contention dazes, depresses, and wearies my judgment” (ibid.).

Montaigne’s desire for gaiety and a pleasant life, to avoid significant mental labour, also affected the kind of books he read (ibid.). Feeling himself incapable of protracted study,

he preferred works where “the knowledge I seek is...treated in detached pieces”, such as stand-alone essays, collections of maxims, aphorisms, and the like—books he could dip into (p. 300). He asked “only to become wiser, not more learned or eloquent”, so wanted the author “to begin with the conclusion” (p. 301). He sought books which would give him raw insight on which he could reflect: the waffle and preparatory remarks, the preliminaries and throat-clearing of verbose books, wearied him (*ibid.*). Considering his life short, he wished to focus only on that material that would grant him the wisdom he desired.

He developed a habit of “adding at the end of each book (I mean of those that I intend to use only once) the time I finished reading it and the judgment I have derived of it as a whole, so that this may represent to me at least the sense and general idea I had conceived of the author in reading it” (pp. 296, 305). In doing this he spoke to his books in his language, regardless of the language they spoke (p. 305). This habit was ostensibly compensation for his poor memory.

It’s unclear whether Montaigne’s memory was particularly bad, but behaving as if it was may have been to his advantage as it led him to focus on thinking through what he read, rather than memorising or excerpting it. He used books to arouse his reason by “offering it various subjects to set my judgment to work, not my memory” (p. 622). In this way his writing couldn’t help but be original because it could only reflect his reasoned reflection applied to himself. He went about (p. 100):

cadging from books here and there the sayings  
that please me, not to keep them, for I have no

storehouses, but to transport them into this one,  
in which, to tell the truth, they are no more mine  
than in their original place

The wise reader transforms and blends pieces borrowed from others and transforms them into something uniquely personal. Montaigne illustrated this process as (p. 111):

The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but  
afterward they make of them honey, which is all  
theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram

This honey constitutes the reader's judgement, their wisdom, which should be understood as the true aim of their education, work, and study (ibid.). When we embrace the opinions of others with our own reasoning, these opinions will no longer be theirs; they will be ours because "[t]ruth and reason are common to everyone, and no more belong to the man who first spoke them than to the man who says them later" (pp. 26, 111). It mattered not to him whether he heard or read these truths. "What shall we do with this people", he asked, "that admits none but printed evidence, that does not believe men unless they are in a book, or truth unless it is of competent age" (p. 828)? He would quote a friend just as he would a classical author, because "truth is no wiser for being older" and "people write just as injudiciously as they speak" (ibid.).

We don't become wise, then, by remembering and reciting the opinions and sayings of others—who didn't own them in any case—but we must understand them to the extent that we possess them (p. 101). He asked: "What good does it do us to have our belly full of meat if it is not digested, if it is not transformed into us, if it does not make us bigger and

stronger" (ibid.)? Education is only worthwhile if it improves us (p. 103). There is not merit in trying to "attach learning to the mind, we must incorporate it; we must not sprinkle, but dye" (ibid.). Learning, for Montaigne, has lower value than judgement, because judgement can do without learning, but learning can't do without judgement (ibid.). We can't be wise "except by our own wisdom" (p. 101).

Montaigne's approach to reading is characterised by intellectual humility. What he has learned "bears no other fruit than to make me realize how much I still have to learn", and more generally his experience leads him to the certainty that human ignorance is an eternal fact: "we must learn that we are nothing but fools" (pp. 822–4). He owes his inclination to (p. 823):

modesty, obedience to the beliefs that are prescribed me, a constant coolness and moderation in my opinions, and my hatred for that aggressive and quarrelsome arrogance that believes and trusts wholly in itself, a mortal enemy of discipline and truth

In books he tended to discover meanings and insights deeper than the author intended or perceived, presumably because he read so much of his own wisdom into the text (p. 93). He explained (p. 298):

Most of Aesop's Fables have many meanings and interpretations. Those who take them allegorically choose some aspect that squares with the fable, but for the most part this is only the first and superficial aspect; there are others more living, more essential and internal, to which they

have not known how to penetrate; this is how I read them.

He had less interest in secondary literature, interpreting interpretations of others (p. 818). “[T]here are more books about books than about any other subject”, he noted: “we do nothing but write glosses about each other” (ibid.). These commentaries “increase doubts and ignorance, since there is no book to be found, whether human or divine, with which the world busies itself, whose difficulties are cleared up by interpretation” (p. 817).

Montaigne reflected that his use of books (p. 628):

consoles me in old age and in solitude. It relieves me of the weight of a tedious idleness, and releases me at any time from disagreeable company. It dulls the pangs of sorrow, unless they are extreme and overpowering. To be diverted from a troublesome idea, I need only have recourse to books: they easily turn my thoughts to themselves and steal away the others. And yet they do not rebel at seeing that I seek them out only for want of those other pleasures, that are more real, lively, and natural; they always receive me with the same expression.

## **Morley, John (1838-1923)**

Morley was a British statesman and writer.

Literature is among the best instruments for systematically training our imagination, sympathies, and engendering a genial and varied moral disposition (Morley 1891, 226). It touches on these topics “with a certain largeness, sanity, and attraction of form” (p. 218). The student of literature uses books to explore the ways people have and do reason morally, the desires of their hearts, ideals of virtue and happiness, and how conceptions of truth and virtue shift over time (ibid.).

Such a reader does not aim to dip into every wise book (p. 211). Reading according to a list of a hundred great books provides us “a hundred parcels of heterogeneous scraps”. This will neither create nor satisfy a wise taste for books, but rather encourage priggishness (ibid.). Instead, we should study authors, subjects, and books in an orderly and connected fashion (p. 213). We may begin with an interest in a particular author or subject, but then proceed to survey outward the ideas and sentiments that arise by reading related books. The intellectual “fruit will be only half gathered” if we dispense with a book having no new ideas or insights on author and subject (ibid.). By surveying the field, however, we should arrive at an understanding of the “ideas, of tastes, of sentiments, of imagination, of humour, of invention, as they affect and as they are affected by the ever changing experiences of human nature, and the manifold variations that time and circumstances are incessantly working in human society” (pp. 219–220).

Reading in this connected fashion, we can get a good map of the territory—a general foundation, from which we can, if

we desire to, read more desultorily (p. 215). By laying these foundations, developing a methodical and systematic schema of the topic, we will subsequently find new knowledge in unexpected places, yet relate it appropriately to what we already know (ibid.).

A book isn't necessarily worth reading because it's famous or historically-important (p. 211). Sometimes this "fame was due to their doing something that needed in their day to be done. The work done, the virtue of the book expires" (ibid.). However, in general, a book worth reading is worth reading again. (p. 209) The masterpieces are worth reading thousands of times and should be made "part of your daily life" (ibid.).

We are not born with "the habit and power of reading with reflection, comprehension, and memory all alert and awake" (p. 206). Acquiring knowledge from books requires both perseverance and self-denial, a price which many people regard as too dear (p. 207). Keeping a commonplace book into which we transcribe what interests and impresses on us from our reading helps to focus our concentration on the passage and make us "alive to its real point and significance" (pp. 209–210).

In fact, we should do most of our reading with a pen in hand. Making abstracts and summaries of what we read is a "useful toil" (p. 208). Morely describes the practice of, prior to reading a new book, the reader making a brief, rough analysis of the questions they expect it to answer—how they expect it to contribute to their knowledge (ibid.). Similarly, through intelligent underlining the book can be made an analysis of the topic suitable for reference (ibid.).

The student of literature should not excessively write for the sake of writing, however; Morley beseeches them to “not all turn to authorship” (p. 222). What is more important is precision in expression, which is achieved by careful, attentive study, with an open and vigilant mind, of the models of exemplary writing (p. 223). This furthers what for Morley is one of the most significant benefits of studying English literature: “helping to preserve the dignity and purity of the English language” (ibid.).

A literary education pursued in this way aims “to make a man and not a cyclopaedia, to make a citizen and not an album of elegant extracts” (p. 226).



## **Morrison, Toni (1931-2019)**

Morrison was an African-American novelist and Nobel laureate.

Reading is a skill in the sense of knowing what words means or understanding a scholarly essay, but Morrison prefers the art (2006). The reader as an artist combines “willing acceptance coupled with intense inquiry” (ibid.). We only understand deeply when we simultaneously surrender, and remain attentive, to the author’s choices, so Morrison reads (ibid.):

slowly, digging for the hidden, questioning or relishing the choices the author made, eager to envision what is there, noticing what is not. In listening and in reading, it is when I surrender to the language, enter it, that I see clearly

In her own fiction, Morrison wanted the reader “to respond on the same plane an illiterate or preliterate reader would” (Morrison 2020, 265). She wanted to draw us out of coolly and distantly accepting data, so that we participated actively in “the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text” (p. 264). This meant that she avoided revealing “an already established reality (literary or historical)” about which author and reader had prior agreement (p. 331). The reader, therefore, doesn’t participate in the text by interpreting it but by helping write it: creating this reality along with the author (p. 347). Morrison terms “invisible ink” the unwritten: “what lies under, between, outside the lines, hidden until the right reader discovers it” (p. 348). A book is not right for every reader, even readers who love it; a book is made for the reader “attuned to the invisible ink” (ibid.).

On this view, “the text is not always a quiet patient the reader brings to life” (ibid.). The author takes responsibility, too, by withdrawing metaphor and simile, writing leading sentences which “contain buried information that completes, invades, or manipulates the reading”, and deliberately leaving gaps which seduce the right reader to fill them—and thus, producing the text in its entirety and attesting to its living life (ibid.). In this way, “[t]he unwritten is as significant as the written” (ibid.). We may be annoyed by these strategies of manipulation if we’re not the right reader, while for others they represent “a gate partially open and begging for entrance” (p. 349). In this fashion Morrison forces the reader into helping her write: “it is the reader whom I summon in invisible ink, destabilizing the text and reorienting the reader” (pp. 349–350). Texts are neither stable nor complete, then; they depend on an active reader to notice the lacuna and continue writing the text (p. 350). Morrison describes the relationship between reading and writing in this way (Morrison 1994, xi):

Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer’s imagination, for the world that imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer’s notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability.

The experience of attentive surrender that reading demands can be “profound, harrowing, beautiful; other times enraging, contemptible, unrewarding”, but is ultimately compelling (Morrison 2006). “I don’t need to ‘like’ the work; I want instead to “think” it”, Morrison explains, and she can then “do this again: read it and be there once more, anytime I like...[m]aking the work work while it makes me do the same” (ibid.). A reader can profit from a work they neither endorse nor enjoy.

To think the work we also need a critical consciousness. Morrison likens her realisation of this to having “been looking at a fishbowl...the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom...and, suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world” (Morrison 1994, 17). As a writer reading, she “came to realise the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (ibid.). She found transparent the “self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (ibid.). Not to see this explicit or implicit presence in American literature is actually difficult, requiring “a kind of wilful critical blindness” on the part of the reader (pp. 17–18, 45).

This “refusal of critical insight” has resulted from habit, manners, and political ideology, but assertion will not make the world un-racialised: “The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act” (pp. 18, 45). The attempt to excise “the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice

that has proven costly” because “criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only “universal” but also “race-free” risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist” (p. 12). We can’t ignore prejudice in literature or will it away; it is part of the work, and we should confront this.

There is a “willed scholarly indifference” to these topics, paralleling the many centuries of blindness to women and their lives in literature (p. 14). Non-academic readers and prominent critics in the United States “have never read, and are proud to say so, any African-American text”, and this refusal “repeats itself when they reread the traditional, established works of literature worthy of their attention” (p. 13). They fail to see “meaning in the thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy—an informing, stabilizing, and disturbing element—in the literature they do study” (ibid.).

Literary criticism, in general, can diminish the reading experience. Morrison suggests that we can still enjoy Shakespeare so much because he didn’t have a literary critic (Morrison 2008, 88). Likewise, she “had the great good fortune” of reading *Finnegans Wake* without any critical assistance: “I don’t know if I read it right, but it was hilarious! I laughed constantly! I didn’t know what was going on for whole blocks but it didn’t matter because I wasn’t going to be graded on it” (ibid.). Full comprehension of a book is unnecessary for its enjoyment; if you don’t understand a book, reread it (p. 200). Ask: how can I inhabit the fictional world (ibid.)?

When we read, then, we should become simultaneously engaged in and watchful of what is being read (Morrison 1994, x). We can watch for the invisible ink, watch for where our prejudicial blindness distorts meaning, but also stop watching

so we can become fully engaged in co-creating a world.

## **Nabokov, Vladimir (1899-1977)**

Nabokov was a Russian novelist and poet.

A good reader of novels is “one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense” (Nabokov 1980, 3). To profit from literature requires a collaboration between reader and writer, both of whom are kind to each other (p. 2):

Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and  
at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think  
he meets? The panting and happy reader, and  
there they spontaneously embrace and are linked  
forever if the book lasts forever

It is only fair that, as the master novelist used their imagination to write, the reader uses theirs to read (p. 4). This can be difficult “when the sullen reader is confronted by the sunny book”, requiring the reader enter into the spirit of the game (*ibid.*). There are two varieties of imagination that a reader can bring to a book, one superior to the other. The inferior kind “turns for support to the simple emotions and is of a definitely personal nature” (*ibid.*). For example, we intensely feel a situation in a book because it reminds us of an event in our experience, or evokes nostalgic memories, or we identify with a character (*ibid.*). Instead, Nabokov wished to teach the reader “to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author—the joys and difficulties of creation” (p. 382).

The reader, therefore, should employ “impersonal imagination and artistic delight”, achieving a harmonious balance between their mind and the author’s (p. 4). As readers (*ibid.*):

We ought to remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy—passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers—the inner weave of a given masterpiece

We must know when to curb our imaginations by visualising the world the author is creating: we need to see and hear the rooms, the clothes, and the people it contains (ibid.). Yet “great novels are great fairy tales” so we shouldn’t expect to learn information about certain places or times by reading them: “To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth” (pp. 1–2, 5).

As a fairy tale, great literature invariably creates a new world. Minor authors ornament the commonplace, but the real writer creates values themselves (p. 2). This is why coming to a novel with a preconceived notion of what it is about is unfair to the author: “If one begins with a readymade generalization, one begins at the wrong end and travels away from the book before one has started to understand it” (p. 1). Our responsibility as reader, therefore, is to closely study this new world, approaching it as brand new with no obvious connection to what we know of our world (ibid.). Only having done this should we examine any associations with other worlds or branches of knowledge (ibid.). Having “lovingly collected” the “sunny trifles”, noticed and fondled the details, *then* we’re free to generalise (ibid.).

Inhabiting this world requires that we are a re-reader (p. 3). We can only re-read, in fact, because the “the complicated physical work upon the book”, the laborious process of “moving our eyes from left to right”, prevents our artistic

appreciation (ibid.). We cannot take in the author's world because this physical reading process stands in the way. It takes multiple readings until "we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting", i.e. take in the whole picture without the element of time (p. 1).

So, we should develop a temperament combining the artistic and the scientific: the enthusiastic artist tends to be too subjective, while the reader utterly devoid "of an artist's passion and a scientist's patience" won't be able to enjoy great literature (pp. 4–5). Indeed, a "great writer is always a great enchanter", so "a good formula to test the quality of a novel is, in the long run, a merging of the precision of poetry and the intuition of science" (pp. 5–6). We should read great books not with our hearts, not with our brains, but with our spines because it is "there that occurs the telltale tingle" (p. 5). We need to keep slightly aloof and detached, but experiencing "that tingle in any department of thought and emotion is the"main thing" (p. 382):

We are liable to miss the best of life if we do not know how to tingle, if we do not learn to hoist ourselves just a little higher than we generally are in order to sample the rarest and ripest fruit of art which human thought has to offer



## Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938-2025)

Ngũgĩ was a Kenyan author and academic.

Born in an outpost of the British Empire, Ngũgĩ was particularly concerned with colonialism. He came to see language as playing a crucial role in continuing colonial impact long after Kenya declared independence from British rule (1991, 9):

The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation.

As readers, we shouldn't see language as merely a tool of communication but a "carrier of culture", history, and values (p. 13). The language in which we read colours our reading, particularly when we read works from other cultures.

One way he attempted to address this issue was to change from writing in English to his native languages of Gikũyũ and Kiswahili (p. xiv). Ideally, his readers would read him in these languages, but he also translated his works to English. That is, by writing in his native languages then translating he was able to express himself more clearly without the presence of colonial influences, yet still reach a wide audience. He suggested that (Fung 2021):

if you know all the languages of the world, and you don't know your mother tongue, that's enslavement, mental enslavement. But if you know your mother tongue, and add other languages, that is empowerment.

An implication being that even if we are fortunate to read in our native languages, we benefit from learning other languages

so that we can read authors in their native language. In a similar vein, as a professor at the University of Nairobi, Ngũgĩ argued that its English department be abolished, and instead African literature, written and oral, should be taught (2012, 9). In the traditional Gĩkũyũ oral culture the oral performance was a dynamic, communal event, involving performer and audience without an arbitrary division between the two (p. 801). Reading and interpretation are enriched by both shared context but also collective discussion. The Western model of the solitary reader pouring over a book is questioned.

Ngũgĩ's philosophy of reading is rooted in the belief that education is never neutral, but either helps liberate or further domesticates. Our choice of texts, and our approach to them, can inculcate us further into narrow belief systems, or help broaden our horizons. Even if we read only in English, we can still read outside our milieu. To liberate literature from a colonial hold, Ngũgĩ coined the term *globalectics*—a portmanteau “derived from the shape of the globe” (p. 8):

On its surface, there is no one center; any point is equally a center. As for the internal center of the globe, all points on the surface are equidistant to it—like the spokes of a bicycle wheel that meet at the hub. Globalectics combines the global and the dialectical to describe a mutually affecting dialogue, or multi-logue, in the phenomena of nature and nurture in a global space that's rapidly transcending that of the artificially bounded, as nation and region. The global is that which humans in spaceships or on the international space station see: the

dialectical is the internal dynamics that they do not see. Globalectics embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tension, and motion. It is a way of thinking and relating to the world...

He believes that this approach will help decolonise the mind. It involves conceptual methods for critically reading European and English literature from a post-colonial perspective, which requires reading relationally: thinking about how texts, cultures, and languages are interconnected through themes and ideas. Colonial control privileges certain modes of knowledge, purposefully concealing other forms. To read in a globalectic fashion means to look for these connections in a way that exposes these hidden forms, revealing how power and knowledge are intertwined. For example (p. 31):

in the paradigm of master and slave, the master will have a view of philosophy, religion, history, human nature, education, and organization of knowledge that conflicts fundamentally with that of the adversarial opposite

The master's conception of history will emphasise that "there reigned ignorance before his arrival, or that there had always been masters and bondsmen", "that people are born masters and bondsmen", human nature is unchanging, that the current system is an expression of divine will, and justify the slave's suffering by reference to an afterlife (ibid.). Literature, even seemingly innocuous texts, is shot through with these kind of power relations, and Ngũgĩ wants us to notice what we otherwise take for granted.

He's not interested in heavily ornamental, dense theory, however. Globalectics is "poor theory" in that it's "maximizing the possibilities inherent in the minimum" (p. 2). The first theories were conveyed in fables, myths, and storytelling: "Confronted with an environment that they could not always understand, the human invented stories to explain it" (p. 15). Theory communicated through fiction remains accessible, helping clarify these interconnections and their impact for everyday people. It has the potential to integrate social life within a larger symbolic imagination (*ibid.*). It can transform lived experience "into a kind of universality in which readers of different ages, climes, and gender can see themselves and the world in which they live, differently" (p. 16). Ngũgĩ credited fiction with helping him reflect upon his own experiences and understand the "inner logic of social processes" such as colonialism and neo-colonialism (p. 19).

Globalectics also constitutes a rejection of the "aesthetic feudalism" which assumes a hierarchy of languages and cultures and places non-Western instances near the base (pp. 60–1). Why should English be the prestigious, *de facto* language of literature? Why should European assumptions about literature continue to hold? By extension, why should "orature"—oral literature—be placed below written literature in this hierarchy? Instead of thinking in terms of hierarchies, we should think in terms of global *networks* to "free the richness of the aesthetic, oral or literary" (p. 85).

To approach a text globalectically is to see it conversation with both classical and contemporary works, allowing it to "speak to our own cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present" (p. 60). This reading "should bring into

mutual impact and comprehension the local and the global, the here and there, the national and the world” (ibid.). We can read “with a narrow, short, or wide angle of view...a concave or convex lens” (p. 58). Shakespeare, for example, “can be read as a racial, national, or imperial export or as a mirror of class and national power struggle” (ibid.).

One of the ways this approach protects us from error is seen in how early European thinkers misunderstood Africa. Having no personal experience of the continent and having read no African authors, they “used each other as sources and proofs of their own observations; prejudice thus reinforcing prejudice till it became an accepted truth, an authoritative norm” (p. 33). When we read without prioritising European literature and look to authors from different cultures to learn about them, we avoid becoming so fundamentally mistaken. The dialectic, which helps found globalectics, originated with Hegel, who also brought into these “missionary and explorer narratives” and saw history as bypassing Africa. By approaching Hegel with a globalectic reading, Ngũgĩ was able to extract what was useful from the texts and discard the rest (ibid.).

Ultimately, Ngũgĩ is asking “do we want to free and be freed by the text” (p. 60)? Whether literature is freeing “may depend on our capacity to release the worldliness in the text” by “how we read it, and what baggage we bring to it” (ibid.). By reading from a globalectic standpoint, “the work of art may contain that which makes us look again, critically, at our baggage” (ibid.). ## Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844-1900)

Nietzsche was a German philosopher.

He trained as a philologist—a scholar trained in painstaking

analysis of classical texts—and this contributed to his conception of the attributes of a good reader, but also fostered disdain for the scholar.

As he “began to cultivate his own distinct domains for reading...he...ignored disciplinary and linguistic barriers in his attempt to Hoover up anything he could find that seemed to fit, or could be made to fit, into his own projects” (Sommer 2019, 43). He “seemed little concerned with the quality of what he read”, often reading compendia, translations, and secondary literature (*ibid.*). Nietzsche credits his loss of eyesight and ill-health with curing him of this “bookworm behaviour”: forced to lay still and not read he regained the ability to hear his “low-ermost self”, to reflect on, rather than react to, texts (Nietzsche 2007, 118–119). When he was able, he spent little time in sedentary study; deeming the thinking he could perform in the open air while walking of much greater benefit (p. 87). Further, he felt it “depraved” to read first thing in the morning at “the dawn of your strength” (p. 96). Reading was for recreation and inspiration, but when working he put his books away because they represented somebody else doing his thinking for him (p. 89).

Having read, walked, and reflected, he recorded his thoughts not as quotations but as aphorisms, which surely benefited his comprehension. By publishing these aphorisms Nietzsche made his work harder to read—due to its content as well as its form—in order to prevent passive reception and force his readers to read actively and respond critically (Nietzsche 2013, 582). His writing demonstrated how we should read. Indeed, he saw reading and writing as virtues that “grow alongside each other and decrease along with each other” (p. 197).

He came to redefine philology as “the art of reading well”: “to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers” (Nietzsche 2005, 5; Nietzsche 2007, 51). A “lento”, ruminative, cautious act; a suspension of judgement in interpretation (Nietzsche 2007, 5, 51). The philologist is a goldsmith who can rework the text with expertise, forging creative meanings while respecting the limits of the material with which they work (Nietzsche 2005, 5).

Interpretation, then, is a process in tension between courageous creativity and the cautious honesty of philological rigour. For Nietzsche, all interpretation is perspectival, valuing more and different perspectives (Nietzsche 2008, 87; Nietzsche 2017, 352). There is no single, correct interpretation, but this is not to say that anything goes. Rather, perspectives should be multiplied to the extent that they are useful, creative, and are honest and just towards the text, without limiting our future interpretations (Nietzsche 2005, 49–50).

It follows that “When his work opens its mouth, the author has to shut his.” (Nietzsche 2013, 60). It is of little value for interpretation, for example, whether a single individual wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and what he/they intended (Nietzsche 1910, 164). Further, conflating an author’s personality with their work, inhibits the text’s ability to communicate (Nietzsche 2013, 65–66). The author neither determines what their book means nor is the arbiter of its interpretations.

A reader requires an instinct for self-defence, “a taste only for what agrees with him” (Nietzsche 2007, 77). This is a principle of selection: “not seeing much, not hearing much, not let-

ting many things come close”. Continually needing to ward off stimuli squanders our strength (p. 95). We protect our health by defending ourselves against books, adopting an attitude of caution or hostility to new titles—as he aged, Nietzsche preferred to reread books that had proven themselves to him (p. 90).

This cautious attitude also reflected his belief that books could be transformative on the reader who is ripe for them and tend to find the reader by accident rather than recommendation (pp. 90–1). We must have had the right experiences before reading a particular work because “nobody can get more out of things—including books—than they already know” (p. 101).

Another form of self-defence is to “react as infrequently as possible”, avoiding becoming a “simple reagent” who surrenders one’s freedom and initiative in reading (p. 96). This principle is illustrated in the negative figure of the philologist: a scholar who pores over hundreds of books a day, and through their work becomes habituated to only affirming or denying what they read (*ibid.*). This external stimuli, the thoughts of others, becomes the only material the scholar works with; they don’t think for themselves and become “ruined by reading” (*ibid.*). Instead, we should react “slowly to all types of stimuli”, scrutinising what comes near, not going to meet it (p. 77).

His reading habits developed over time from the traditional works appropriate to his aspirations of becoming a minister then philologist, to become “highly creative but also highly selective” (Sommer 2019, 38). His training allowed him to “be extremely attentive to detail, but he preferred to look for a bigger picture” (p. 41). He rarely read solely for entertainment: fiction for him was a source of material for philosophical re-



flection (p. 46).

According to Sommer, “When Nietzsche read, he read in order to think and write. When he did not, he also did so in order to be able to think and write” (p. 47). Nietzsche’s perfect reader is “a monster of courage and curiosity, who is also supple, cunning, cautious, a born adventurer and discoverer” (Nietzsche 2007, 103).

## **Parks, Tim (1954-)**

Parks is a British author and translator.

The globalisation of literature has led to the homogenisation of novels: the market rewards books that transcend local concerns and speak to major social issues that resonate universally, and authors who write in a style amenable to rapid translation (Parks 2014, 76, 82, 190).

A positive implication is that reading a current, popular work enables you to “join an international conversation”. For literature to perform this social function a group of people must “find a single recently published book” that they have all read, and the market makes certain titles highly available (Parks 2019, 192, 195–6). Hence, discussions tend to involve the current, popular novel, further popularising them. Contemporary novels can excite us in a particular way when they represent a reaction to a world for which we have a basis for comparison. Ideally, we ask questions of them such as (p. 31):

how is it that someone sharing my world wrote this book that I perhaps find strange and difficult? What are they trying to tell me about it, about the way I perceive it? Is it a useful difficulty? Could I too, perhaps, react to our times in this way, and would it make sense if I did so?

Will a book written to “travel” be sufficiently strange and speak to us in this way? Any “consensus on aesthetics” is breaking down, so global best-seller status “is rapidly becoming the only measure of achievement that is undeniable” (p. 209). Instead, Parks suggests, we should “hold on to the

idea that what matters about a book for the reader is our experience reading it, not the number of copies it has sold” (ibid.).

International literary prizes don’t fare much better as proxies for literature selection because globalisation has uncoupled them from national literatures, suggesting “that it’s the reputation of the prize that counts, not nurturing writers in a given community” (Parks 2014, 3). Their aim is impossible because “a work of art is intimately bound up to the cultural setting in which it was created”: it “means more, and more intensely, in the world that produced” it (Parks 2019, 61). Hence, a negative implication of books being expected to have “universal appeal” is that it robs communities of books which speak in their voices to their specific concerns (Parks 2014, 76).

We tend not to be aware how far our reading is “driven by publicity and availability”, so need to consider how these factors shape the titles we choose (pp. 67–8). An insidious effect is how they narrow mainstream literary choice while purporting to provide increased diversity. An English translation of a new book from a foreign country does not necessarily expand our world view if written for translation and oriented toward discussing global issues. Perhaps we can respond to these pressures by seeking authors from different cultures whose works are not entirely understandable to us, and learn to sit with incomplete comprehension: aware that we’re reading as a stranger, listening in?

We can also defend ourselves against these forces and our tendency to have too much respect for the printed word by refusing to treat books as revered objects (Parks 2019, 2). The best way to improve as a reader is to read “with a pen in the hand,

ready to mark the pages at any moment” (p. 105). We should physically engage with the book by: making “three or four comments on every page, at least one critical, even aggressive”, putting “a question mark by everything you find suspect” and underlining “anything you really appreciate” or that you don’t believe (p. 4). “Becoming aware of how you might instinctively wish to change a text...is both to understand the book better and to understand something about yourself” (Parks 2014, 39). Ebooks aid this approach “by eliminating all variations in the appearance and weight of the material object” (p. 23). They offer “a more austere, direct engagement with the words appearing before us”: they’re “a medium for grown-ups” (ibid.). Whatever the medium, Parks encourages us to question and interact with the text directly, helping us absorb more from the text and providing notes that can be revisited later. This is also a symbolic act of challenging the notion that the author’s work is beyond critique.

Using books like this reflects Parks’ belief that “reading is an active skill, an art even”, so “there must be techniques and tools that everyone can use or try” (Parks 2019, 105). He describes the kind of questions he poses when reading. Firstly, “what are the qualities or values that matter most to this author, or at least in this novel?” (p. 106). “What is the emotional atmosphere behind this narrative?”; what are the consequences (p. 107)? He often changes his mind about the values the story is organising itself around, but the attempt to identify them gives him something to focus on (ibid.). He explores the “connection between these force fields — fear/courage, belonging/exclusion, domination/submission—and the style of the book, the way the plot unfolds”, asking: “How is the writer trying to

draw me into the mental world of his characters through his writing, through his conversation with me?” (ibid.). A crucial question: “Is this a convincing vision of the world?” (p. 109). Are the concerns raised real or “just been brought together to “do literature?”” (p. 110). Our responses are conditioned by where we’re “coming from” and our position on “the issues that matter most for the author” (Parks 2014, 46, 106; Parks 2016, xi). Asking these questions “gives direction to the pen in our hands”, offering us “something to think about and a way into the text” (Parks 2019, 108).

As our response to a text is conditioned in this way there is no single correct interpretation of a book. Instead, “literature offers us an immensely rich, ramified, and nuanced series of “conversations” or “encounters” in reaction to which we are constantly discovering and reconstructing our own identities” (Parks 2016, xi). To benefit from this situation we must be aware of our habits, and ready to negotiate, even to surprise ourselves—it may be “the books that very slightly shift an old position, or at least oblige you to think it through again, that become most precious” (Parks 2014, 50). Even if we don’t come to hold the book’s values, “it is fascinating, and useful, to appreciate that there are people who move in quite different worlds of feeling from our own” (Parks 2019, 54).

Sometimes it’s not that we don’t agree with a book but that we don’t understand it: “the characters, their reflections, their priorities, the way they interact, do not really add up” (p. 48). This may just be the result of a bad book, but it may reflect where we’re reading from: “where we find ourselves confronted with complete enigma... it is perhaps worth giving the author the benefit of the doubt, or coming back to the

book after putting it down for a while” because “the book that initially seems plain wrong to us” could be “precisely the one that allows us to understand something new about other people” (pp. 53, 55–6).

Rereading in this way was the key to Parks understanding *Ulysses* (pp. 54–5). Likewise, when he first read *The Waste Land*, “it was hardly a reading at all” (p. 23). Many more lessons on and readings of it led his mind to conjure “a lock that allowed the poem to function as a key; it fitted into my mind, and something turned and swung open” (ibid.). This lock became easily adapted to other modernist poems to the extent that they would elicit a sense of *déjà vu*. On this view our “mind is not devising a key to decipher the text, it is disposing itself in such a way as to allow the text to become a key that unlocks sensation and “meaning” in the mind” (ibid.). We should ask: what “is the experience, or disposition, that this text is seeking to unlock in us?” (p. 25). Rereading is a way for Parks to remember “the excitement of feeling that particular lock turn in my mind” by dipping back into a text to rekindle a particular connection, often reading a chapter or even just a few pages at random (p. 26).

However, Parks sees suggestions like Nabokov’s that “there is no reading, only rereading” as amounting “to an elitist agenda, an unhappy obsession with control, a desire to possess the text (with always the implication that there are very few texts worth possessing) rather than accept the contingency of each reading moment by moment” (p. 22). Reading is forgetting, for Parks: “not to pass some final judgement on the text, but to engage with what it has to offer to me now” (p. 21).

He also rejects the notion that completing a book is a virtue in

itself: we should not “attach self-esteem to the mere finishing of a book” (Parks 2014, 16). This is understandable for bad books, but are there also “occasions when we might choose to leave off a book before the end...and nevertheless feel that it was good, even excellent, that we were glad we read what we read, but don’t feel the need to finish it?” (pp. 15–6). In Parks’ opinion, putting down a novel before the end “is simply to acknowledge that for me its shape, its aesthetic quality, is in the weave of the plot and, with the best novels, in the meshing of the writing style with that weave” (p. 19). “There is a tyranny about our thrall to endings”, so we should feel free to choose where a book ends (*ibid.*).

Nor does Parks view reading *per se* as a virtue. It is popularly conceived that there is “a hierarchy of writing with the likes of Joyce and Nabokov at the top and *Fifty Shades of Grey* at the bottom”, and that between them “there is a kind of Neoplatonic stairway”: a “pathway upward from pulp to Proust” (Parks 2019, 131, 135). Parks disputes that people progress in this way. He notes that “genre fiction prevents engagement with literary fiction, rather than vice versa, partly because of the time it occupies, but more subtly because while the latter is of its nature exploratory and potentially unsettling, the former encourages the reader to stay in a comfort zone” (p. 133). He’s not saying that genre fiction shouldn’t be read, just reminding us that we’re fooling ourselves if we read while imagining this stairway to exist (p. 136).

Simple, formulaic fiction is, however, a good fit for a reading environment subject to many distractions—often of a digital nature. We’re now “actually *inclined* to interruption. Hence more and more energy is required to stay in contact with a

book, particularly something long and complex.” (p. 127). Books with long sentences or that require a great deal of context to be kept in working memory, are incompatible with this situation. How would our reading improve if we took the time we dedicated to it more seriously, even if that meant reading less?

Ultimately, Parks wants us to question our convictions about literature (Parks 2015, vii). Is it “undeniably a good thing, a liberal thing, a life-enhancing thing”? Is the act of reading “of its nature intrinsically positive and always and assiduously to be encouraged”? Do “human beings require a constant supply of stories to make sense of the world”? Is there “justifiable self esteem to be attached to the mere writing and reading of novels”? Is there “any ultimate “need” for their existence”?



## **Ricoeur, Paul (1913-2005)**

Ricoeur was a French philosopher.

There is a distance between us and a text caused by language and time: a “cultural estrangement” (Ricoeur 1976, 43). If we’re reading a text in translation, we’re interpreting some third party’s interpretation of it; even if the text was originally written in a tongue with which we speak, the older it is, the more this language differs in subtle ways from ours. Time in general is distancing because the original audience shared many implicit assumptions with the author, which we either don’t, or aren’t aware that we don’t.

Yet we also belong to the same world by means of traditions and writings (Kaplan 2008, 189). We share assumptions and allusions and a basic human nature that allow us to relate and find common ground. Recognising this should make us more willing to approach older texts or those from alien cultures: however distant they are from us, they also share a part of our experience and so can be fruitful and approachable. These concerns are most visible when considering classical texts, but are no means limited to them. Even contemporary authors writing in our native language and sharing many of our assumptions are distant from us purely because they are different people to us. Indeed, the familiarity we feel toward them may obscure important differences.

So there is a “hermeneutic circle” that constitutes our understanding from which we cannot escape (p. 190). We belong to the world we interpret, yet are always at a distance. We must be “hermeneutically modest” that we are in this inescapable position (p. 189). To be arrogant in this respect is to impose our

own worldview and the assumptions of our culture on the author, judge them on this basis, and ignore or minimise our differences; to look at an older author as less civilised and refined as us, naïve in understanding what is obvious to us. Reading well requires that we understand our place in this configuration, and the nature of this tension between distance (“distanciation”) and our personal belonging in meaning.

This distance makes the text an autonomous object. The text is autonomous of the author, its original socio-cultural context, and its original audience (Ricoeur 1976, 37). We do not know the intentions of its author, and even if we did they aren’t necessarily helpful. This is quite a subtle point because it can seem non-intuitive. It partly explains how classic texts are timeless, each subsequent generation interpreting them anew according to their own concerns; how a modern Westerner can understand a text from an ancient Chinese sage; and why remarkable works can originate from contemptible authors, or be used in ways that the author couldn’t have anticipated. The author isn’t the arbiter of the text’s truth. The text escapes its origin.

Distanciation can never be overcome, but nor should it be (Kaplan 2008, 200). It has a positive character in being “the soul of every critical philosophy”: by making possible the distancing of ourselves from our traditions we are better able to evaluate the text critically (*ibid.* (quoted in)). It’s easier to see our flawed assumptions and the practices we take for granted when they’re presented in a radically different context.

The counterpart to distanciation is “appropriation”: the act of interpretation (p. 199). This is our effort to make the world of the text, as opposed to the text itself, more

familiar to us (Ricoeur 1976, 37). So, we don't aim to possess the text, but instead give the text room to reveal its world. In this way we expand our knowledge and consciousness of both the text and ourselves. Appropriation allows us to see things differently—experience, understanding, and self-understanding are all linked (Kaplan 2008, 200–1).

To understand a text we must see it as a response to the implicit question it was meant to answer, the same question that we belong to because we belong to the same world (p. 188). Its autonomy means that there is an inescapable conflict of interpretations for a single text. Ricoeur explained (1976, 77–8):

The text as a whole and as a singular whole may be compared to an object, which may be viewed from several sides, but never from all sides at once. Therefore the reconstruction of the whole has a perspectival aspect similar to that of a perceived object. It is always possible to relate the same sentence in different ways to this or that other sentence considered as the cornerstone of the text. A specific kind of onesidedness is implied in the act of reading. This onesidedness grounds the guess character of interpretation.

We guess by finding clues contained within the text, which either permit an interpretation or inhibit it (pp. 76–8). There “are no rules for making good guesses”, but “there are methods for validating those guesses” (p. 76). One interpretation seems more probable than another if it accounts better for how the clues converge (pp. 78–9). So, there's no one true meaning of a text, and we can't defer to an imagined author to prove our

interpretation. Yet this is not a situation of senselessness where anything goes; Ricoeur isn't advocating a reckless relativism.

The text "presents a limited field of possible constructions": there are always multiple possible interpretations, but they are unequal (p. 79). We validate our guesses with an "argumentative discipline comparable to juridical procedures used in legal interpretation, a logic of uncertainty and of qualitative probability" (p. 78). We aim to "show that an interpretation is more probable in the light of what we know", as opposed to verifying that it's "true" (ibid.). Our interpretation must "not only be probable, but more probable than another interpretation" (p. 79).

This logic "allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and scepticism" (ibid.):

It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach

An implication is that if we find ourselves dogmatic or sceptical about an interpretation, it's a sign that we don't understand what we have read. An antidote is considering and debating alternatives. We interpret a text by imagining the world it reveals then playing with it in our imagination, "just as a musician performs a score or a preacher interprets a biblical text" (Kaplan 2008, 191). For Ricoeur, "What is to be interpreted in the text is a proposed world which I could inhabit and in which I could project my ownmost possibilities" (p. 192 (quoted in)). The text's meaning comes "after it, in the

world made by it, and the world of its reception” (p. 191). Its autonomy allows it to open up new worlds (Ricoeur 1976, 87–8). Exploring the possible worlds proposed by the text unfolds meanings to which we must respond (Kaplan 2008, 193).

Ricoeur is perhaps best known for his *hermeneutics of suspicion*, an approach to interpretation “geared to unmasking and removing the illusions of symbols, which not only reveal but also conceal meaning” (p. 198). This is a “frequently misunderstood” transitional stage in his thought, that continues to be used in arguments resembling “trends of a pessimistic tenor, which he himself rejected” (Scott-Baumann 2009, 1). He also referred to an “exercise of suspicion”: “intentional, controlled and proportional”, which “can function more fruitfully as a condition of possibility than as a limiting condition”, as a Ricoeur scholar summarises (pp. 174, 76):

Suspicion should be part of critical exegesis, ‘the act of dispute exactly proportional to the expressions of false consciousness’, with the requirement for rigorous back questioning to identify false consciousness and other obscured areas. Suspicion is a rich and radical enough condition of possibility without being partnered with hermeneutics, which has very similar characteristics to suspicion; ‘hermeneutics’ and ‘suspicion’ prove too potent when put together

One of the ways it is rich is that, because we play an active part in interpreting autonomous texts, suspicion invites us to “personalize concepts” (p. 184):

No longer can we pretend that laws, books,

works of art and opinions based on racial stereotyping or cultural habits are impersonal representations of natural justice and beauty and nothing to do with us—Ricoeur urged us to challenge them as products of our own, personal human action and therefore open to suspicion.

## **Robinson, Francis P. (1906–1983)**

Robinson was an American educational psychologist.

He believed that effectively studying books is a skill, not an innate talent, and that by learning a deliberate and structured approach, anyone could improve their comprehension and retention. His approach is named SQ3R: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review. It was designed to help students engage with texts and retain information over the long term, and remains a generally useful approach for learning from non-fiction in particular.

Before reading, you should *survey* the book: quickly scanning the chapter or text to get an overview of the content (F. P. Robinson 1961, 29). Look at the title, headings, subheadings, charts, and summary paragraphs. This should take only a few minutes. It helps to create a mental schema for the material: a framework for the reading to come. This allows you to orient yourself to the text's structure and major ideas before you hone in on the details. Begin with the big picture, not the first word on the first page. Robinson suggests how to practise this skill (p. 31):

Take some reading material on topics with which you are familiar, e.g., newspapers, digest magazines, previously read textbooks, etc., glance over the headings in an article or a chapter, and then make guesses as to what the material will actually say. Check to see how well you have done.

Based on this survey we should actively generate *questions* about the material. We can turn “boldface headings and italicized phrases” into questions to guide our reading (p. 19).

This serves “to arouse your curiosity and thereby increase your comprehension” (p. 29). By reading with a specific purpose, you become an active participant in the learning process, searching for answers instead of passively absorbing information. This “skill is an ability to make an attitude-shift at the start of each section and ask oneself “Well, now, why are we going into this?”” (p. 34).

With these questions in mind, you *read* the text to find their answers. Robinson urges students to make this an “alert, active search” and not a “passive, plodding along of each line” (p. 29). Read one section at a time. Focus on your chosen questions to help filter out irrelevant information and identify the most salient concepts.

When you find answers you can make a note of them, however, this practice threatens to distract you from reading and occupy too much time. In fact, the habit of excerpting what you read into your notes can result in the note taking substituting for the reading: creating the note feels like you’ve read and remembered the passage (p. 31). Instead, Robinson suggests writing “working notes” from memory and only at the end of section (pp. 31–32). They should be “positive phrases”, in an outline form to visually indicate the relationships between ideas, and very brief: “little more than a word or a phrase” (pp. 34, 32). They should be meaningful to you specifically, precisely because you have read the material; if they’re fully comprehensible to a stranger you’ve been too verbose (p. 32). Underlining can help this process, but should also be done at the end of a section, only used for the most important points, and use “a numbering or marking system that shows relationships among the points marked” (p. 38).



Robinson suggests that people's habit of reading "fiction in order to forget their troubles and not to remember what is in the book" can carry over to reading non-fiction and give rise "to a delusion that since the ideas are comprehended as they are read they will, of course, be remembered and unconsciously organized as answers to questions" (p. 31). This is wrong; to learn, "the reader must know what he is looking for, look for it, and then organize his thinking on the topic he has been reading about" (ibid.). This explains why actively formulating questions is an important habit to learn, but also suggests that we can adapt the questioning step to novels so that we remember more of them, too.

Our "tendency in reading is to keep going", but instead, after reading a section, we should pause, look away from the book and try to answer our questions from memory, using our own words (ibid.). This is the *recital* step, but that doesn't mean a literal speaking aloud. Actually, reciting by writing is often more effective because "it forces the reader actually to verbalize the answer, whereas a mental review may often fool a reader into believing that a vague feeling of comprehension represents mastery" (ibid.). Interweaving reading and recital prevents you from conducting long, uninterrupted reading sessions in which you were ostensibly studying, but in fact weren't paying attention. If we don't test our understanding, it's illusory, and if we can't explain the answer in our own words, we don't understand it. It's important to express the concepts in a way that makes sense to you, and to derive your own examples of them, in order to demonstrate a true understanding of the material.

Having finished reading a chapter in this way, go back and re-

flect on your learning. This should not take more than about five minutes (p. 33). Review your notes to get a “bird’s-eye view of the points and of their relationship and check your memory as to the content by reciting on the major subpoints under each heading” (p. 30). Try to mentally recall these main concepts and the structure of the chapter. This review should be done soon after finishing (e.g., later that day) and again periodically to combat forgetting (p. 33). This helps consolidate the information in your memory, and ensure that you understand how all the pieces of the chapter fit together.

Is this method only applicable to textbooks, though? Certainly the structure of textbooks, their organisation and “cues” make them easier to study (p. 15). Non-fiction is generally “written that the expert reader can know what the main idea is even as he starts to read a section and is able to skim, skip, or study in the right places”, whereas we tend “to read fiction straight along”. So, the SQ3R steps need to be modified for different forms of literature. Instead of clearly-delimited sections with informative headings, the reader may need to find other logical divisions at which to pause and reflect. Most significantly, the questions answered by the text won’t be as clear. When students are assigned works other than textbooks, for example, “the survey step consists of thinking why the book was assigned and looking over the preface and chapter headings for an over-all orientation”, then the next step involves turning these points into questions (p. 40). In the case of fiction, which we raised above, Robinson suggests the following questions as starting points (p. 44):

1. What techniques has the author used to make his writing particularly effective in

attaining his goals?

2. What subjective or emotional purposes has this piece of writing?
3. What outstanding episodes or quotations in the selection should be learned because they are often referred to by well-educated people?
4. What did you think of this piece of writing? What effect did it have on you?
5. In what way have you learned to select and appreciate better forms of aesthetic or emotional expression?
6. What was the writer's intent in producing this particular selection?

SQ3R can seem like a time-consuming procedure, but Robinson argues that its benefits and efficiency make it worth mastering for students. It can be applied without assistance or secondary materials, which also makes it useful for self-directed learners outside of formal education. It constitutes an active reading which takes advantage of a text's structure and textual cues to guide a purposeful search for answers. By insisting on low-effort note-taking, and their regular recital and review, Robinson's approach provides a practical path to learning from texts.

## **Rorty, Richard (1931-2007)**

Rorty was an American Neo-pragmatic philosopher.

We should read broadly and diversely across various genres, including fiction, philosophy, social theory, ethnography, and journalism, he suggested, to engage with different traditions and avoid being confined by a single “final vocabulary” (Rorty 1989, xvi). Rorty’s concept of a *vocabulary*, or paradigm, refers to the terms we employ to explain the behaviour of, and narrate, ourselves and others. It “stands for a loose description of a social practice, with all of its conceptual norms. In that social practice, words mean what they mean because people use them in certain institutionalized ways and not in others” (Santelli 2020). Books are our primary instruments for encountering and internalising new vocabularies.

Self-creation involves the “reweaving and redescription of personal identities” (McClean 2014, 137). Books facilitate this by offering new descriptions and new vocabularies that allow individuals to invent their own language and metaphors (Rorty 1989, 27). This enables a person to re-describe themselves and their past, thereby creating a new self: every human life is a poem, an “attempt to clothe itself in its own metaphors” (pp. 35–6). Reading provides the raw material and inspiration for this ongoing “hierophanic project of self-creation, of soul-making” (McClean 2014, 62).

Cultural change depends on “a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well”, so by exposing us to new ways of speaking and describing the world, reading encourages this process in a manner akin to how “old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and

foil for new metaphors” (Rorty 1989, 7, 16). Through engagement with diverse texts, we can “expand the reference of the terms ‘our kind of people’ and ‘people like us’” (McClean 2014, 9 (quoted in)).

Moral progress is achieved not through abstract arguments about universal human nature, but through “sentimental education” that expands our empathy (ibid. (quoted in)). Literature, by providing “detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and...redescription of what we ourselves are like”, helps to “sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language” (Rorty 1989, xvi; McClean 2014, 147 (quoted in)). This process involves adopting new “moral vocabularies” that allow us to see “more and more traditional differences... as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation” (Rorty 1989, 192).

Books can help us become “more sensitive to the ways that we have been cruel to others on the way to our own personal goals in life, our own personal redescrptions” (McClean 2014, 147–8). Books of this sort can be divided roughly into those “which help us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others”, and “those which help us see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others” (Rorty 1989, 141).

The first type is “typified by books about, for example, slavery, poverty, and prejudice”: they “help us see how social practices which we have taken for granted have made us cruel” (ibid.). They include “*The Condition of the Working Class in England* and the reports of muckraking journalists and government commissions, but also novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Les Miserables*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *Black Boy*” (ibid.). The second type concerns “the ways in which

particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people” (ibid.):

the most useful books of this sort are works of fiction which exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person. By identification with Mr. Causaubon in Middlemarch or with Mrs. Jellyby in Bleak House, for example, we may come to notice what we ourselves have been doing. In particular, such books show how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing. They are the books which dramatize the conflict between duties to self and duties to others.

Aside from Eliot and Dickens, he suggested that works of Olive Schreiner, Richard Wright, Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, and Nabokov serve this function (p. xvi). A specific example is taken from Nabokov’s *Lolita*, where Rorty discusses the following passage in which the protagonist, Humbert, gets a haircut (p. 162 (quoted in)):

In Kasbeam a very old barber gave me a very mediocre haircut: he babbled of a baseball-playing son of his, and, at every explodent, spat into my neck, and every now and then wiped his glasses on my sheet-wrap, or interrupted his tremulous scissor work to produce faded newspaper clippings, and so inattentive was I that it came as a shock to realize as he pointed to an easelled photograph among the ancient gray

lotions, that the moustached young ball player  
had been dead for the last thirty years.

For Rorty, this passage “epitomizes Humbert’s lack of curiosity—his inattentiveness to anything irrelevant to his own obsession—and his consequent inability to attain a state of being in which ‘art,’ as Nabokov has defined it, is the norm” (p. 163). Nabokov deliberately includes such details, and then, in his Afterword, points out that readers often miss them (ibid.). The impact is that the reader, upon realising their own inattentiveness to the barber’s suffering (the loss of his son), becomes “suddenly revealed to himself as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious” (ibid.). The message is (p. 164):

to notice what people are saying. For it might  
turn out, it very often does turn out, that people  
are trying to tell you that they are suffering.

In interpreting books from different cultures Rorty advocated a “frank ethnocentrism”: a recognition that “we cannot leap outside our Western social democratic skins when we encounter another culture, and we should not try” (McClean 2014, 140–1 (quoted in)). This acknowledgment of our cultural embeddedness should be coupled with an active effort to “[fuzz] up the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ so as to put aside any notion of *permanent* mutual incomprehension or incommensurability” (p. 141 (quoted in)). The aim is that we realistically acknowledge the human condition: we always operate from a particular historical and cultural perspective, and can never achieve a neutral, “God’s-eye” view (p. 97). Therefore, reading does not demand the abandonment of our cultural identity to the text but rather

the cultivation of a “rooted cosmopolitanism” that uses our own cultural framework as a starting point for empathetic engagement (p. 92). We blur “us” with “them” by expanding our sympathies and recognizing shared vulnerabilities (like pain and humiliation), despite differing “final vocabularies”. This approach fosters tolerance by helping us recognise the contingency of all cultural forms, including our own.

Rorty considers books tools for human purposes—“all we ever do with anything is use it” (p. 58 (quoted in)). This instrumental view is part of his anti-idolatry stance, which aims to “put into their proper places the cultural tools before which we too commonly fall to our knees” (p. 59). By treating books as tools rather than sacred objects or sources of absolute truth, Rorty encourages a pragmatic engagement with them, fostering intellectual humility and distrust of “intellectual snobbery” (p. 61 (quoted in)). We can approach texts with specific goals, extracting what is useful for our own projects rather than seeking a singular, universal message. For instance, a reader might engage with a philosophical text not to discover its “true” meaning, but to find a new vocabulary that helps them articulate their own problems or aspirations. We should be active agents in our reading, transforming texts into resources for our own intellectual and practical endeavours.

Texts comment on other texts; they don’t represent or mirror the world. The goal of texts about physics and philosophy, for example, is not to accurately represent reality, but to offer new interpretations or engage in a kind of writing that comments on previous writings. Physicists are people “looking for new interpretations of the Book of Nature” (Rorty 1982, 90).



Texts are autonomous, so their meaning is generated within an intertextual network, rather than being derived from an external referent. Thus, authorial intent is rejected as the ultimate authority for meaning. Rorty endorses a reader who “asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose” (p. 151). This is achieved by “imposing a vocabulary...on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens” (ibid.). An author’s own vocabulary of self-description is not necessarily the best for understanding them (ibid.).

Our focus shifts, then, from what the author “undertook to signify” to the text’s role in an ongoing, evolving conversation (ibid.). The “retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers” become the primary guides for interpretation (p. 165). Meaning is negotiated and refined through communal discussion and the exchange of perspectives, rather than being individually discovered. Readers are encouraged to engage in dialogue, offer their interpretations, and consider the objections and alternative readings of others, understanding that the “truth” is what “can survive all objections” within a given conversational context (ibid.).

We should approach texts, then, as creative re-interpretations or redescriptions of existing vocabularies, rather than as discoveries of preexisting truths or essences. Meaning is made, not discovered. The pursuit of a singular, definitive meaning in texts, or a universal method for uncovering it, is misguided. There cannot be a “last Word” or a final commentary, as writing always leads to more writing (p. 109).

## **Rose, Jonathan (1953-)**

Rose is a history professor focusing on reading and reading practices.

In his study of how common readers use books he discovered that “reading can be and has been the most fundamental expression of human freedom, even in repressive societies” (Rose 2018, vii). A theme that animates this history is how people have read in groups. For example, he reports that “By 1906 it seemed that every American town of any size had a ladies’ literary society, self-organized and democratically governed” (p. 63). There were also “more than 500 Shakespeare clubs across America, largely in small towns, and most of them organized by women” (pp. 63–4):

These were grassroots institutions of higher self-education, where there were no professors and all students were on an equal footing. Remarkably, they did with Shakespeare everything that professional academics do today. They staged their own productions. They closely analyzed the texts, and tried to discern the nuanced meanings of Elizabethan English. They read critical studies of Shakespeare, and they edited their own journals, which published their own scholarship and criticism. They situated the plays in their historical context, related them to modern literature, and performed interdisciplinary studies that connected Shakespeare with (for instance) art history. They assigned themselves homework: essays, study questions, syllabi, and oral presentations.

This is an incredible picture. Women who were excluded from their larger society “had to make their own cultural life” (p. 64). They were engaging with difficult texts, in a deep fashion, without academic training. They were learning for the pleasure of learning and self-improvement in self-governing societies. Is this a model that could be revived?

Less self-governing, but also formed around the works of Shakespeare, are numerous prison reading groups of his plays in the U.S and the U.K (p. 117). Convicts sometimes memorise his canon, and in jail embrace the plays “as a kind of bible”: “Shakespeare is like a god to a lot of the other guys here, because the majority of them don’t believe in a god” (ibid.). A Shakespearean play is “a series of moral choices, where individuals think through alternatives”: it reveals to the inmates “where and why they went wrong” (p. 118). This is partly because: “With Shakespeare you can extract from the text or you can read into it. It’s like the text has a life of its own...” (p. 119).

Among convicts who had been through this program, “recidivism was practically zero, and psychological testing found improved self-esteem, more benevolence, more spirituality, a decrease in verbal aggression, and greatly sharpened problem definition” (p. 124). If our reading doesn’t have this effect on us, should we be asking why? If homesteading, uneducated people of the early 20th century, and violent prisoners society has given up on, can benefit from texts in this way, what holds us back? Our choice of reading material, our attitude to the text, our lack of community?

In both types of reading groups, participants encouraged diversity of views and dissenting opinions about the texts.

The ladies groups felt free to criticise the critics, and the prisoners learned “the capacity for respectful dissent” (pp. 64, 124). This is in contrast to the situation Rose describes in universities, where he sees the logic being: “books can make readers uncomfortable, reminding them of traumatic episodes, and therefore they should be prefaced with ‘trigger warnings’” (p. 191). He sees this as impractical given “the unpredictability of reader response”—“how can a teacher guess beforehand which readings will disturb which readers?” (ibid.). But more importantly, this is unhelpful to the reader (p. 192):

The pain that reading provokes in troubled minds is a necessary part of the healing process.

He asks: “If a book doesn’t trigger something, what’s the point of reading it?” (ibid.). He identifies this “squeamishness” as a peculiarly modern phenomenon; previously “novels were supposed to trigger deep emotional disturbances, and might be considered insipid if they didn’t” (ibid.). So, the reading groups outside the academy are freer in this regard. They are more in keeping with how liberated readers have developed in the past: through self-selecting, self-governing groups, relating texts to their own lives and experiences, responding from the heart rather than in academic cant, and regarding triggering books as tools for growth and reflection.

Rose discusses bibliotherapy groups wherein readers report that they’re helped “through identification with characters who have endured similar ordeals...There may indeed be a wincing flashback to the original trauma...but the end result is catharsis” (p. 193). Realising that their burdens are both real and widely shared, readers describe the process as validating,

comforting, and hopeful (ibid.). These groups also tend to prefer classic titles. Rose discusses a bibliotherapy group for “people at the bottom of the social scale” who voted to read *Great Expectations*—this being a popular title in such groups (ibid.). Marginalised and uneducated readers enjoying classic works in this way—resisting the stereotypes surrounding their preferences—has been common in many milieus Rose explores. These readers’ experiences should discourage us from only seeking comfortable novels, and also from believing that classic, “difficult” titles are unsuitable for people without higher learning—especially in a group setting, classical works can be approachable and highly rewarding.

If groups can’t be self-governing, some lessons from historical examples may help describe how they can be organised. A critical point is that the teacher must respect the autonomy of the student, cultivating the reader’s individuality (pp. 41–2). One teacher explained: “the students gave the course; I criticized their presentations” (ibid.). Further, he”replaced critical class essays with creative-writing assignments, asking students to respond to the assigned texts with their own poems, stories, and plays” because the “creative habit of mind, no matter how modestly exercised, is the surest of all protections against pedantry” (p. 42). Even reading independently, we can experiment with responding to literature in this way. Rose tells of blue-collar African-Americans in the 1850s who wrote “unwritten histories” by creating scrapbooks of newspaper items and “African-Americana” from mainstream sources (p. 18). This was a way to respond creatively to what you read, with scant resources, to create a source of inspiration, a record of black achievement.

Through discussion, collage, and creative writing we can organise our reading and make it a source of discourse, translating it into common coin which we can exchange with others so we all become better off. When Rose found liberated readers, they tended to be outside of academia, often together in reading groups.

## Rosenblatt, Louise (1904-2005)

Rosenblatt was an American professor of English Literature.

She identified a crucial distinction between a text (the static words on the page) and a *poem* (the lived experience created when a reader and text interact). This poem is unique to each reading, “an event in time” (Rosenblatt 1994, 12):

It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem.

Reading, therefore, is a *transaction* between reader and text. The text is a “blueprint for a literary work of art”, offering us “both openness and control” (p. 168). The reader is active, like a director, supplying the tempo, the gestures, and the actions of the cast of characters (p. 13).

Rosenblatt vehemently opposed the notion of the passive reader because the reader’s personal reservoir of life and language is the very material from which meaning is built. The “reader’s creation of a poem out of a text must be an active, self-ordering and self-corrective process” (p. 11). The text stimulates the reader, focusing their attention, and evoking their past experiences. The reader uses the text as a guide for which experiences to call forth: a regulator for their hypotheses about how the work unfolds (ibid.). Our

emotions, memories, biases, and knowledge form our unique perspective, and this isn't a problem to be overcome; it's the lens through which the text comes to life for us.

This transactional theory of reading contrasts sharply with traditional views that see meaning as either residing solely within the text or being imposed on it by the reader. Words are just "squiggles on a page" until a reader's mind "links the sign with what it points to" through a mental association, therefore a text has no single meaning (Karolides and Rosenblatt 1999). We shouldn't treat the text "like a machine, whose parts can be analyzed without reference either to the maker or to the observer (or reader)" (Rosenblatt 1976, 280–1). Our readings are unique and personal. However, Rosenblatt is not suggesting "that every evocation from a text is as good as every other": there's no single, correct reading but there are "inadequate interpretations" (p. 281).

The distinction is difficult to settle in theory, but "we can arrive at some consensus about interpretations that are to be rejected as ignoring large elements in the work, or as introducing irrelevant or exaggerated responses" (*ibid.*). We can use the text as our "control" by asking what it contains that justifies our response (p. 282). We "can make clear the criteria, the framework of ideas or knowledge, or the standards of evaluation, that we are bringing to bear on our experience" (*ibid.*).

In the context of children's English classes, Rosenblatt suggests that "Discussion of personal responses, of the text-as-lived-through, can thus give rise to a truly inductive study of literature" (p. 286). As adults, we can have a similar experience in book clubs and seminars. This act of sharing our responses to texts, discovering how other people respond to the



same text, and scrutinising our reasons together, can further clarify standards by which meaning is made. We may discover that we have overreacted to, or ignored, some element, or “that some word or image has triggered a fantasy or awakened some personal preoccupation quite alien to the text” (ibid.). Having left school, we can create our own classrooms.

As students of literature we should seek works in which we can “become personally involved”—the “quality of the actual reading experiences” trumping the complexity or greatness of the work being read (p. 283). Rosenblatt encourages us to bring to the text whatever in our past experience is relevant; not read coldly, “arriving first at something called “the meaning” or the paraphrasable sense, and *then* starting to feel or think about it” (p. 284). We should ensure that in our approach “we are not in actuality substituting other aims—things to do *about* literature—for the experience *of* literature” (p. 287).

These approaches to a text are governed by our *stance*: the purpose that shapes what is paid attention to during the reading event. In an *efferent* stance our attention is focused on what will be retained after the reading—information, facts, directions, data: “what will remain as the residue” (Rosenblatt 1994, 23). In an *aesthetic* stance our attention is focused instead on what we experience during the reading—the feelings, ideas, sensations, and emotions evoked: what the reader “is living through” in their relationship with that particular text (p. 25). These stances are extremes on a continuum of approaches to reading, and we generally adopt one automatically, according to our purpose for reading and the cues offered by the text (pp. 23, 54). Instead, Rosenblatt

suggests, we should make this choice consciously by matching our stance to our purpose, then fluidly shifting along the continuum during reading. By directing our attention appropriately—reading some texts, some passages, more efferently, and others more aesthetically—we shape the poem we produce.

The literary work, then, is a new experience we mould from the text: “a text, once it leaves its author’s hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work—sometimes, even, a literary work of art” (p. ix). Imaginative literature is “an extension, an amplification, of life itself” (Rosenblatt 1976, 278). Our purpose is to combine this reading experience with our other experiences, which is why the “benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity” on our part (*ibid.*). We become better readers when we accept and embrace the process by which we read (*ibid.*):

As the reader submits himself to the guidance of the text, he must engage in a most demanding kind of activity. Out of his past experience, he must select appropriate responses to the individual words, he must sense their interplay upon one another, he must respond to clues of tone and attitude and movement. He must focus his attention on what he is structuring through these means. He must try to see it as an organized whole, its parts interrelated as fully as the text and his own capacities permit. From sound and rhythm and image and idea he forges an experience, a synthesis, that he calls the poem or play or novel.

Rosenblatt wants us to reclaim reading as a deeply personal, human event. Her work is a call to move away from a culture of correct readings and toward one of shared experience, empathy, and critical self-awareness forged through the powerful transaction between a reader and a text.

## **Rundell, Katherine (1987-)**

Rundell is an English author, often writing children's fiction.

She suggests that at some times in our adult lives reading children's fiction "might be the only thing that will do" (Rundell 2019, 1–10). Specifically, Rundell advocates that adults read "texts for children that acknowledge the right of the child to have as rich a story as the adult writing it would demand for themselves" (pp. 11–2).

This kind of writing is generally dismissed as "not rich or odd or deep": "childish" (pp. 1–10). But Rundell distinguishes childishness from something with "childhood at its heart": "Children's fiction is not written by children; it stands alongside children but is not of them" (ibid.). There is a notion that as we age we should read more mature and complex works; that to read children's fiction as an adult is a regression. But if reading is to avoid becoming "something that we do for anxious self-optimisation...*all* texts must be open, to all people" (ibid.).

Fairytales, for example, were never just for children; they were "always designed to be a way of talking to everyone at once" (pp. 23–33). Through their use of "archetypes and bass-note human desires, and... metaphors with bite" they can yoke diverse people "into the same imaginative space" (ibid.). They're about hunger—for power, justice, love, and change—and "blood-covered and gasping" optimism—"the life principle writ large" (ibid.). They record human vice without falling into pessimistic despair (pp. 53–64). They can reignite our feelings of "awe and hunger and longing for justice" (pp. 34–39).

Fairytales also trace our cultural evolution in how they remain alive, changing in retelling (pp. 23–33). Along with myths and legends, they found our world, so we need to “keep reading them and writing them, repossessing them as they possess us” (ibid.). They invite retelling, refashioning, and so involve us as co-authors.

At times we are powerless as adults, and children’s books, written for people without politico-economic power, can remind us of “what we have left to us, whenever we need to start out all over again” (pp. 40–2). They can’t right the world by themselves but can express truths in a better way than can abstract language, by resisting reduction, distilling “in their purest, most archetypal forms hope, hunger, joy, fear” (pp. 11–12). The genre had pedagogic origins, but as we mature they try to teach us something else: they speak of hope, hope that bravery, wit, empathy, and love matter—hope that we urgently need to hear.

This kind of fiction “offers to help us refind things we may not even know we have lost”, “how to read: how to lay aside scepticism and fashion and trust [ourselves] to a book” (pp. 43–52). It offers access to a time “before your imagination was trimmed and neatened, as if it were an optional extra” (ibid.). By demonstrating that imagination is not optional, that it’s “at the heart of everything”, children’s books “give the heart and mind a galvanic kick” (ibid.). Rundell exhorts (pp. 53–64):

So defy those who would tell you to be serious,  
to calculate the profit of your imagination;  
those who would limit joy in the name of  
propriety. Cut shame off at the knees. Ignore  
those who would call it mindless escapism: it’s

not escapism: it is findism. Children's books are not a hiding place, they are a seeking place. Plunge yourself soul-forward into a children's book: see if you do not find in them an unexpected alchemy; if they will not un-dig in you something half hidden and half forgotten. Read a children's book to remember what it was to long for impossible and perhaps-not-impossible things. Go to children's fiction to see the world with double eyes: your own, and those of your childhood self.

## Ruskin, John (1819-1900)

Ruskin was an English polymath.

There are two kinds of books, in his estimation: those “of the hour” and those “of all time” (Ruskin, 19). This is not a classification of merit, but rather one of “permanence” or “species”: both encompass good and bad books (pp. 19–20).

Books of the hour are “the useful or pleasant talk of some person whom you cannot otherwise converse with, printed for you” (p. 20). They may be useful and pleasant, but ultimately have the character of letters or newspapers, just in better print: they are written to convey a voice (pp. 20–1). They are not truly a book to be *read* (p. 21).

By contrast, a “book of all time” is written not merely for communication but to “preserve” the author’s voice. The author wishes to say something which they deem true, useful, beautiful, or original—their “inscription or scripture” (pp. 21–2). This writing does not necessarily correspond to an entire printed book; it is whatever part of an author’s work that is “honestly and benevolently done...the true bits”: “those *are* the book” (pp. 22–3). Such writing displays a distinctive attitude: it “is full of admiration and awe; it may contain firm assertion or stern satire, but it never sneers coldly, nor asserts haughtily, and it always leads you to reverence or love something with your whole heart” (Ruskin 1971, 226).

The library of books of all time represents a treasury of history’s wisdom, a “court of the past” which is open only to “labour and merit” (Ruskin, 24). Any literate person may partake in this “conversation of the wise”: “Learn to understand it, and you shall hear it” (ibid.). The wise will not stoop; the

reader must rise to them by possessing a genuine desire to be taught by them, “enter into their thoughts”, then “enter into their hearts” by sharing their passion or sensation (pp. 25–50).

The first condition—entering into the thoughts of the wise—is opposed to trying “to find your own expressed by them” (p. 25). We read a book because we believe that the author is wiser than us in some respect, so has something to teach, but this implies that they will think differently to us (*ibid.*). So when reading we should expect to feel that the ideas are strange, having not occurred to us; it is no compliment to either us or the author that what we’re reading is exactly what we already think (pp. 25–6).

We must first ascertain the author’s meaning before we judge the text’s truth (p. 26). The truth is often hidden, so discovering it is a long and painful process (pp. 26–7). This requires “the habit of looking intensely at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning...letter by letter” (p. 28). An educated person knows their language precisely in terms of correct pronunciation and etymology (p. 29). It redounds on our character to investigate all words of which we have doubts, patiently consulting a dictionary (p. 35). Reading rightly is to examine the text word-by-word, paying attention to every accent and expression, but further it requires “putting ourselves always in the author’s place, annihilating our own personality” in order to enter theirs (p. 45).

The second condition for the reader to rise to the wise—sharing their passion or sensation—is to feel with them what is righteous (pp. 51–2). True passion, like true knowledge, is “disciplined and tested” (p. 52). These are noble feelings which we cultivate from a just and stable disposition through



careful contemplation (ibid.). Ruskin believed that “we are only human in so far as we are sensitive, and our honour is precisely in proportion to our passion” (p. 50).

In becoming mighty in both mind and heart—magnanimous—we advance in life: our heart gets softer, our blood warmer, our brain quicker, and our spirit enters into “living peace” (p. 84). To converse with great authors of the past, to learn from them, we require the proper “incantation of the heart”: in rising to their level by becoming mighty, we are able to deeply understand their wisdom (p. 82). We become capable of rousing these “kings” of wisdom and sharing their treasures—“treasures that needed no guarding—treasures of which, the more thieves there were, the better!” (p. 87).

In another context Ruskin suggests reading the Western classics of Ancient Greece, Dante, Shakespeare, and Spenser (Ruskin 1971, 226). He cautions against magazines and reviews, objecting to the notion that with a reviewer’s help you can understand a subject without pains. Instead, we should read the book on the subject with the best reputation; if that doesn’t suffice, seek another on the same subject (ibid.).

A healthier mind will result if you “restrain your serious reading to reflective or lyric poetry, history, and natural history, avoiding fiction and the drama” (pp. 226–7). When we do read imaginative literature, we should read in short bursts, “trying to feel interest in little things, and reading not so much for the sake of the story as to get acquainted with the pleasant people into whose company these writers bring you” (p. 228). We may be amused by a common book, but only a noble, kingly book “will give you dear friends” (ibid.).

## Schopenhauer, Arthur (1788-1860)

Schopenhauer was a German philosopher.

Our reading must always be subordinate to developing a coherent, connected system of original thought. We realise our own knowledge and gain power over it only after pondering it from all sides: assimilating it and incorporating it with our own thoughts. It is of far more value to think something out for ourselves than find it in a book because it is only our “own fundamental thoughts that have truth and life in them” (Schopenhauer 1974, 493). Truth “merely learned” is “without harmony, relation, and meaning” (p. 494).

We can only think over what we know, so learning is certainly necessary, but to read is to let the author think for us (pp. 491–2). We substitute their thoughts for ours. This can be helpful when the source of our own thoughts stagnates, because unlike reading and learning we cannot simply will to think (p. 493). Thought must be “kindled and sustained...through some interest in its theme”, so when we read we retain what interests us—what suits our system of ideas or aims (pp. 491, 559). Put another way, desiring that we should retain everything we have ever read in memory, is the same as wishing to retain in our stomach all that we have ever eaten (p. 559). However, when we would benefit from reading and find a book worthy of our time, repetition is the mother of studies (ibid.):

Every important book should at once be read through twice partly because the matters dealt with, when read a second time, are better understood in their sequence, and only when we know the end do we really understand the

beginning; and also because, on the second reading, we approach each passage in the book in a mood and frame of mind different from that which we had at the first.

Too much reading, picking up a book whenever we have a spare moment, is inimical to the reflection on, and assimilation of, what we learn. We frighten away our original thoughts and deprive our mind of elasticity (p. 492). Our mind suffers total compulsion from without to “think first of one thing then of another, for which it has absolutely no inclination or disposition” (p. 491). In this way many learned people have “read themselves stupid”, paralysing their minds with scattered, second-hand, unconnected thoughts, that, lacking a personal origin, a relation to what they already know, are liable to be forgotten (p. 554).

An excess of reading can habituate us to substituting the thought of somebody else for ours, to forget our own course of thought, and distract us from “making direct use of the book of the world”: “That which is intuitively perceptual and real is, in its original nature and force, the natural object of the thinking mind and is most readily capable of deeply stimulating it” (pp. 492, 496).

To be able to read great books, we must practice the “art of *not* reading” bad ones; we have too little time and strength to read anything other than the works of great minds (pp. 557–8). These are the works that surpass all others and which the “voice of fame indicates as such” (p. 557). Only these truly educate. This is literature that endures: pursued by people “who live *for* learning or poetry” (pp. 558–9). Schopenhauer suggests that Europe produces “scarcely a dozen works” in a cen-

tury which are permanent in this way (ibid.).

The art of *not* reading involves not taking up a book merely because it's of current interest to the general public, whose folly is "of not wanting to read anything except what has just been printed" (p. 502). Literature of this sort is pursued by people who "live *on* learning or poetry"; it is fleeting, quickly forgotten, and should be rejected (p. 559).

In the main, novels are not to be read because they delude their reader about real life. When their lessons are credulously accepted "the place of mere negative ignorance is now taken by a whole tissue of false assumptions, as positive error, which afterwards confuses even the school of experience" (pp. 632–3). They perniciously give rise to expectations "which can never be fulfilled" (p. 633).

Reading can make us better writers by making us aware of our natural gifts, giving us courage to use them. But this requires that we assume these qualities are already within us, latent. Without them we learn nothing from reading but cold, dead mannerisms, and become mere imitators (p. 555).

Good books are "the quintessence of a mind"—the result of all of an author's thought and study (pp. 559–560). They are useful to a thinker, then, as long as they are permanent and remain subordinate to the organic, relative unity of their insight.

## Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1950-2009)

Sedgwick was an American literary critic and queer theorist.

She questioned the paranoid style of reading<sup>10</sup> that has become “nearly synonymous with criticism itself” (Sedgwick 2003, 124). This practice of “[s]ubversive and demystifying parody, suspicious archaeologies of the present, [and] the detection of hidden patterns of violence and their exposure” is a “wised-up popular cynicism”, so by no means limited to academia and theoreticians (p. 143). Nor is it limited to individuals: it also operates on the scale of “shared histories, emergent communities, and the weaving of intertextual discourse” (p. 150). In our world of endemic systematic oppression it has come to seem naïve not to read in this way, but Sedgwick warned of the dangers of it being our default strategy (pp. 125–6).

Paranoid reading is averse to surprise so seeks to eliminate it: requiring that “bad news be always already known” (p. 130). It has a “distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive” (p. 146). The perpetually suspicious reader is bereft of hope.

A critic in the paranoid mould stresses “the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure”, acting as if the criticism’s “work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known. That a fully initiated listener could still remain indifferent or inimical, or might have no help to offer, is hardly treated as a possibility” (p. 138). The implicit claim that “things are bad and getting worse” can’t be refuted, and paranoia lacks the ability to

---

<sup>10</sup> A distortion of a concept of Paul Ricoeur.

predict or formulate oppositional strategies (p. 142). Therefore, in its almost totalising sweep of methodological assumptions, it risks impoverishing our literary-critical toolkit, diminishing our ability to anticipate or respond to political change (pp. 143–4).

“Paranoia knows some things well and others poorly” (p. 130). Its strategies are one way of understanding among others, however it tends to blot out the alternatives (pp. 130–1). It is monopolistic (p. 126). Its exclusive faith in demystifying exposure forecloses explicit recourse to motives for reading such as pleasure and amelioration (p. 144). These “reparative” motives are seen as “merely aesthetic” and “merely reformist”, and are described in such “sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary” terms that it’s unsurprising few critics adopt them (pp. 144, 150).

Sedgwick differed. Reparative reading is “[n]o less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic” (p. 150). In undertaking “a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks” it “will leave us in a vastly better position to do justice to a wealth of characteristic, culturally central practices, many of which can well be called reparative, that emerge from queer experience but become invisible or illegible under a paranoid optic” (pp. 150, 147). “At a textual level”, it seemed to Sedgwick, “related practices of reparative knowing may lie, barely recognized and little explored, at the heart of many histories of gay, lesbian, and queer intertextuality” (p. 149). To read in this reparative fashion is to (p. 146):

surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.

## Self, Will (1961-)

Self is an English writer and political commentator.

He grew up reading whatever was to hand, promiscuously, freely mixing genres, fiction and non-fiction, and both children's and adult's books (Self 2022, 164). As an adult he continued this approach, reading about a hundred books simultaneously, practising (pp. 22, 166):

a promiscuity born of fidelity rather than its dereliction; a fidelity not to a given work or its author, but to the great palimpsest of texts, worked up, worked over, interleaved and woven with one another, that constitutes literature in its entirety

We should read “as gourmands eat, gobbling down huge goblets of text”, comprehending “the caresses of one work in the arms of another” (p. 166). Indiscriminate reading taught Self to discriminate and comprehend. Only by reading voraciously do we develop appropriate schemas, “supple enough to interpret new material” (ibid.). However, we not only need to suspend disbelief, we have to also suspend comprehension: reading while experiencing doubt as a luxury (pp. 166–7). We should not expect to comprehend everything we read; if we encounter a difficulty we should just read on, “secure in the knowledge that either the context will supply the answer, or the writer will use the same words again in a different one” (ibid.). Self reflects that he found the deepest engagement with texts in his “more negative capability”: “I learned more by resisting the effort to get up and consult a dictionary or an encyclopaedia than I did by doing so” (p. 167).



This promiscuity must be combined with faith: “keeping faith with a single text, toughing it out until the very end, regardless of either longueurs or those purple passages whereby it seems to be being unfaithful to its reader” (p. 168). To understand how texts and authors are related, you have to read sufficient quantities for these comparisons to become intuitive, and to become fully absorbed in a book you need to persevere with it (p. 270). Self suggests (p. 169):

it’s in the oscillation between textual monogamy  
and polygamy (or polyandry) that we find our  
true love of—and engagement with—reading

In a matter of decades “people came—entirely paradoxically—to believe both in the undoubted existence of a literary canon, and its baleful effects on what we now call inclusiveness” (p. 266). This implies to Self that “many diverse people really were being told what to read by a group of people exhibiting considerably less diversity themselves” (p. 268). And, for him, to tell people what to read is analogous with telling them where they’re allowed to sit on the bus (p. 266).

Self takes neither side of the canonicity debate. The traditionalists make “the canon a synecdoche of the social and economic hierarchies as currently constituted” (p. 269). The revolutionists’ attempt to alter the canon is to “enact a sort of cultural counterfactual: rendering the readers of today somehow magically altered in terms of their own acculturation” (ibid.). Both parties are prescriptive about what we should read (ibid.). Not only should we read as widely and deeply as possible, but “such eclecticism and absorption is our principal prophylactic, protecting us from the blights and pestilences that surround our cultivated little enclaves”

(p. 270). So, Self exhorts: “read what you want”, but with a caveat (pp. 273–4):

be conscious that, in this area of life as so many others, you are what you eat, and if your diet is solely pulp, you’ll very likely become rather ... pulpy. And if you read books that almost certainly won’t last, you’ll power on through life with a view of cultural history as radically foreshortened as the bonnet of a bubble car

We should read because the turf wars over belief, the key philosophical debates, “have been waged on the territory afforded by language itself”, so to participate you need to be a skilled reader (p. 10). We should read in order to understand and connect with people we’re separated from by literacy, space, time, or technology (p. 9). We should read because, without communing with them, reading is the best way to enter into diverse modes of being and abiding there (pp. 9–10):

To enter the flow-state of reading is to swim into other psyches with great ease, whatever their age, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, class or ethnicity

## Sontag, Susan (1933-2004)

Sontag was an American author and literary critic.

She began reading at age three, and read “gluttonously” (Sontag 1995, 272). Before entering university her “intellectual work...was simply *taking in*”, but once there she learned a method for reading which was “comparative, and basically ahistorical”: “a constant dialogue of texts” (pp. 272–3). She was taught to read very closely, thoughtfully examining the text word by word (p. 273). This “was the best education for learning how to read that one could imagine”, and she continued to employ this method in her later work (ibid.). If there was any defect in this education it was its inattention to the historical context of what she read, and this took her a lifetime to correct (ibid.).

Sontag described most of her reading as rereading (p. 194). She told an interviewer that she was currently reading *Mrs Dalloway* for the forth time, and that each time “it has seemed like a different book, this time I thought it more extraordinary, more original, even stronger than I had remembered”, and her journal entries make frequent reference to this practice (ibid.; Sontag 2008, 19–20 (e.g.)). A book worth reading only once isn’t worth reading at all (Sontag 1993). A proxy for important books, then, is that they invite rereading. Another proxy is the literary canon because “the judgement of posterity is correct” in this regard: it is clear which authors are worth reading 25-30 years after their work is over (Sontag 1995, 240).

We have the habit of approaching books with the intention of interpreting them (Sontag 1966, 5). Interpretation is a process of translation whereby the interpreter asks: “don’t you

see that X is really—or, really means A? That Y is really B?”—“plucking a set of elements...from the whole work” (ibid.). It assumes that what the text clearly means is not what later readers demand of it, so seeks to resolve this supposed discrepancy (p. 6). Modern interpretation is overtly contemptuous of appearances so “as it excavates, destroys; it digs” behind” the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one” (ibid.). This can be seen as a “radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it” (ibid.). In this way Marxism and Freudianism, for example, are “aggressive and impious theories of interpretation” such that “[t]o understand is to interpret. And to interpret is to restate the phenomenon...to find an equivalent for it” (p. 7). We can learn to be conscious of reading in this way by asking ourselves: to what am I attempting to translate this text?

Instead of trying to translate the elements of a piece of literature into something different, considering the content independently, we should pay more attention to its form (pp. 8, 12). We must “reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it”, celebrate “transparence”: “experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are” (p. 13). Books become real to us when we “recover our senses”, learning to “see more, to hear more, to feel more” (p. 14). When we criticise a book we should “show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (ibid.).

In some contexts interpretation is a means of liberation from the “dead past”, but in others it’s “reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling” (p. 7). So the way in which we interpret texts “must itself be evaluated, within a historical view of hu-

man consciousness” (ibid.). Interpretation of the reactionary sort is the “revenge of the intellect upon the world” because it impoverishes our world “in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’” by which it makes books “manageable and comfortable” (pp. 7–8). Sontag summarises her position: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (p. 14).

When Sontag was a child, “waiting to grow up, waiting to escape into a larger reality”, to read, to have access to literature “was to escape the prison of national vanity, of philistinism, of compulsory provincialism, of inane schooling, of imperfect destinies and bad luck” (Sontag 2007, 209). She made these remarks in her acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, where she described literature as both dialogue and “the history of human responsiveness to what is alive and what is moribund as cultures evolve and interact with one another” (p. 204). It is “the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom” (p. 209). In fact, Sontag concluded, particularly when “the values of reading and inwardness are so strenuously challenged, literature is freedom” (ibid.).

To exercise this freedom we should read what has survived the judgement of posterity, and what benefits rereading, closely, comparing it to other texts with an eye to its historical context. We shouldn’t fixate on translating the text to fit our ideology or preconceptions, but rather make full use of our senses by also attending to its surface.

## **Thoreau, Henry David (1817-1862)**

Thoreau was an American naturalist, essayist, and poet.

Reading well, “to read true books in a true spirit”, was for Thoreau “a noble exercise, and one that...requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object” (Thoreau 1996, 79–80). This training involved the habitual practice of reading, compulsive “note taking, and conceptualizing” that he developed at Harvard University (Sattelmeyer 1988, 62, 24). In his notebooks he copied out extracts from what he read. They began as conventional commonplace books and became, as he matured, more detailed records of what he read (p. 24). At first he tried to keep a commonplace book for facts and another for poetry, but found the distinction difficult to maintain (p. 63). Indeed, this distinction between poetry and facts partly constitutes Thoreau’s distinction between “true books” and good books.

The latter seem to have been primarily for research. In his systematic note-taking during the years in which “he read, copied extensively, and made notes and commentaries on English poetry and verse drama”, he also compiled eleven volumes “on all aspects of American aboriginal history, culture, and allied subjects” (pp. 31, 64). When attempting to select which books he should read to study a particular subject, he advised: “Though there may be a thousand books written upon it, it is only important to read 3 or 4—they will contain all that is essential and a few pages will show which they are” (Thoreau 1962a, 362). He links this extensive journaling and reflecting on his reading to his literary endeavours (Thoreau 1962b, 1588):

The more you have thought and written on  
a given theme, the more you can still write.  
Thought breeds thought.

The “true books” Thoreau referred to tend to be characterised as classics and the foundational texts of cultures, e.g. “Scriptures of the nations...Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles...Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares” (Thoreau 1996, 82). He exhorted: “Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all” (Thoreau 1983, 96). In a journal entry he described this kind of text as “something as wildly natural and primitive—mysterious and marvellous, ambrosial and fertile—as a fungus or a lichen” (Thoreau 1962a, 168).

These require a certain character to read, and in turn inform one’s character: books in which “each thought is of unusual daring”, or that “make us dangerous to existing institutions”, can not be read or enjoyed by the timid or idle (Thoreau 1983, 96). Having read such a book, one feels the need to “commence living on its hint”: “What I began by reading I must finish by acting” (Thoreau 1962a, 72). More generally (Thoreau 1983, 99):

the best books have a use, like sticks and stones,  
which is above or beside their design, not anticipated in the preface, not concluded in the appendix

A preference for first-hand, factual accounts dominated Thoreau’s reading. We learn less from “learned” books, than “from true, sincere, human books, from frank and honest biographies” (p. 98). Accordingly, he reports: “I never read

a novel, they have so little real life and thought in them” (p. 71). Nor did he have the inclination for reading newspapers (Thoreau 1962a, 550). In Walden he likens all news to gossip, explaining (Thoreau 1996, 73):

I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked...we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications?

Thoreau believed that we receive only what we are ready to receive: “We hear and apprehend only what we already half know” (Thoreau 1962b, 1571). So, we fail to observe phenomena or facts which we cannot link with what we previously observed. Not only must we read true, original books, but we will only benefit from them when we are intellectually prepared, and therefore sufficiently interested in, and attentive to, their message. For example, he remarks (Thoreau 1962a, 699):

Many College text books which were a weariness and a stumbling block when *studied* I have since read a little in with pleasure and profit

“Thoreau read widely, deeply, and eclectically” (Sattelmeyer 1988, xi). His routine devoted the morning to “some literary labor—whether working on a lecture or essay or writing up previous days’ Journal entries from field notes—the afternoon in walking or boating, and the evening in reading” (p. 58). He described his typical evening (Thoreau 1962b, 1095):



Now for a merry fire, some old poet's pages, or  
else serene philosophy, or even a healthy book of  
travels, to last far into the night, eked out perhaps  
with the walnuts which we gathered in November

Thoreau's philosophy of reading is embodied in *Walden* where he enjoins: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written": the heroic reader diligently studies the texts that are deserving of their attention, to the extent that they are true, sincere, and human, and makes a novel use of them (Thoreau 1996, 80).

## **Ulin, David (1961-)**

Ulin is an American book critic and author.

A professional reader who framed the world through books, he found himself losing the ability to read (Ulin 2010, 3). He could no longer read how he used to—"a hundred or so pages every evening" (p. 35)—because now when he begins reading his mind wanders to e-mail and the Internet, distracted by technology and current events (ibid.). His struggle was "the encroachment of the buzz, the sense that there is something out there that merits my attention, when in fact it's mostly just a series of disconnected riffs, quick takes and fragments, that add up to the anxiety of the age" (ibid.). Ulin's reflections on this now common situation suggest how we might cope with these problems.

In our "overnetworked society", we can fall for the illusion that "speed can lead us to illumination, that it is more important to react than to think deeply" (p. 34). Books, however, "insist we take the opposite position, that we immerse, slow down" (ibid.). Literature is a "cutting to the chase" in a culture of noisy distraction (p. 25). It opposes our "ever-present now" in which there's "a sense of skittering across the surface, a feeling of drift, both mental and emotional, in which time and context become unmoored" (p. 76). Reading well "demands space" and "a certain kind of silence": "by drawing us back from the primacy of the instant it restores time to us in a more fundamental way. It's not possible to read a book in the present, for books exist in many moments all at once." (pp. 34, 80). Reading forces us to pay attention, which brings us back into contact with our inner life (p. 80). We both possess the books we read, and let them possess us (p. 16). In reading

*The Great Gatsby*: “Fitzgerald inhabits me and I animate him” (p. 148). In this realm “we allow ourselves to merge with the consciousness of another human being” (p. 16).

This fragile intimacy of reading is also threatened by e-readers and reading on screens because they tempt us to multitask (pp. 131–3). The object of the physical book, however, can bring to mind our previous experience of reading it, and also serve as part of our culture’s collective memory (pp. 123, 129). Kindle e-books that can’t be directly shared with other people compromise “our common informational heritage” (p. 123). In this way, “e-books privatise the public elements of reading” while “the physical library effectively does the reverse” (p. 128).

Ulin came to see “an act of resistance” in reading, a “matter of engagement in a society that seems to want nothing more than for us to disengage” (p. 150). Instead of surrendering to informational overload, seeking information at its most instant, reading slowly forces a “reckoning with time”: we’re made to pace ourselves (ibid.). By slightly withdrawing from the world we regain it, joining “a broader conversation, by which we both transcend ourselves and are enlarged” (p. 151). We are enlarged because reading helps us engage in self-identification, encouraging us to identify with other people (p. 102). It can function as a template, on which certain emotional states or experiences are imprinted, with which we come to a reckoning with life (ibid.). It blurs divisive boundaries between us and common narratives are essential for living in community [Ulin (2010), pp. (pp. 148, 37–8). Reading in this way is a meditative act, “with all of meditation’s attendant difficulty and grace” (p. 151).

Ulin began re-learning to read by retiring to his office alone, away from distractions. He found that he needed “silence—not to disconnect but as a respite, to uncover a little piece of stillness in the din” (p. 147). Once he got used to this environment he started to get situated with *The Great Gatsby*, which he’d found so difficult to reread as a distracted adult, by paging through some passages, which transported him back into the world of the novel (p. 148). Soon he found that he could read briskly without distraction, almost as if “a teenager again” (ibid.). He had no agenda, and “was reading purely for the sake of reading, for the play of the sentences, for the flow of the narrative” (ibid.). He concludes: “I sit down. I try to make a place for silence. It’s harder than it used to be, but still, I read” (p. 151).

## Wilde, Oscar (1854-1900)

Oscar Wilde was an Irish author, poet, and playwright.

When he worked as a literary critic he contrasted his approach with that of his peers who were “reduced to be the reporters of the police-court of literature” (Wilde 1997, 47). These “poor reviewers” read merely to report facts and describe details, and they read the whole book (*ibid.*). This is the conventional approach to reading: to follow a proscribed path through a book, then report on the content—to our self or others. Wilde rejected this conception.

Reading a book fully is a waste of time even for a critic because, once you develop taste and an instinct for form, you can say what a book is worth in ten minutes—half an hour at most (pp. 47–48). But Wilde’s concern isn’t time management or writing reviews. A critic, for him, is an artist who creates their own work in response to another. And to respond to a book we need not read it fully, nor should we, because doing so can impair our creativity. It’s on creativity that Wilde’s philosophy of reading hinges: using literature to fuel our own creations. This is a general principle of how we can engage with a work of art: “as simply a suggestion for a new work” of our own, which needn’t bear any obvious resemblance to the original (p. 70). Criticism is a record of the critic’s soul, concerned only with their moods and passions, and if we read in this spirit we are all critics (p. 63). Merely reporting on, or passively receiving, dull volumes leads one to misanthropy; we owe to history a duty to re-write it (p. 50).

“The world is made by the singer for the dreamer”, and reading as a dreamer is Wilde’s prescription (p. 56). We appreciate

these songs because of our temperament, not because we were taught to. Advising people what to read is, therefore, useless or harmful because it won't engender an appreciation for literature (Wilde 1968, 3). Accordingly, when he suggested dividing books into three classes—those to read, those to reread, and those not to read at all—he focused particularly on the third category, which included “all argumentative books and all books that try to prove anything” (ibid.). He further disliked works that are so literal or intelligible they set definite bounds to the imagination. What use are these to the creative? We should reject works that “have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile” (Wilde 1997, 74–75). We should cast aside dull texts that offer obvious, unambiguous meanings, in favour of those which “possess the subtle quality of suggestion” (p. 73). Art becomes complete in its beauty through its very incompleteness, and so is known through only our aesthetic sense, not our faculties of recognition or reason (pp. 71, 74). The dreamer fills in the blanks with their imagination. Just as they don't read to report, they don't read the mere reports of others.

They read, instead, works of imaginative literature because these “make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final” (pp. 74–75). For Wilde, the meaning of a book is as at least as much in the reader as the author (p. 68). The highest criticism “does not confine itself...to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final” (ibid.). To truly understand Shakespeare, for instance, requires the critic to “bind Elizabethan London to the Athens of Pericles, and to learn Shakespeare's true position in the history of European drama and the drama of the world” (pp. 80–81).

This interpretation is necessary, but not in the service of “treating Art as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed” (p. 82). Rather, we can interpret a book to the extent that we can intensify our personality: the more strongly our personality is expressed, the more real, satisfying, convincing, and true is our criticism (*ibid.*). Or, “There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies” (p. 85).

Reading and personal identity are closely linked, then: we read to express ourselves, to create ourselves. But to become self cultured we must also practice scholarship (p. 112). This brings us back to the experienced critic being able to judge a work in ten minutes: they develop their faculty of aesthetic judgement. We educate ourselves in this way by seeking “beauty in every age and in each school”, while avoiding limiting our search with prejudice, stereotypes, or custom (p. 125). This means, firstly, remembering that “the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate”: books are neither moral nor immoral; they’re merely written well or poorly (pp. 229, 126). More generally, we limit our growth as readers when we lack sufficient examples with which to compare and contrast what we read. We refine our taste when we read broadly, diversely, with reflective discernment and “disinterested curiosity” (p. 106). We realise a contemplative, creative life in this way because “To arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one’s own” (pp. 113, 121–122). To “understand others you must intensify your individualism” and remain “curious of new sensations and fresh points of view” (pp. 83, 125). The beauty of literature is found in how it allows us to understand and express ourselves through its contemplation.

For Wilde, we read as a pretext for writing our autobiography. We may have no desire whatsoever to produce a concrete work of art, but we are already such a work and we are the artist. Our experiences with other artworks can inspire us and stimulate our imaginations, suggesting ways that we can become more self-cultured and complete. If our aesthetic experience affects who we become, however, we must ensure that it is diverse and does not congeal into narrow, stagnant niches. We must read broadly to become well-rounded, and this requires that as we search for beauty we hone our ability to judge what's worth dreaming about, and what should be confidently rejected. We become more individual, more intense, a better book, when we read in the spirit of writing our own story.



## **Wolf, Maryanne (1947-)**

Wolf is a scholar of reading, specialising in cognitive neuroscience and literacy.

In the seven years it took to write her book describing how the reading brain evolved, she noticed that our literacy-based culture was becoming very different and digitally-based (Wolf 2018, 6). Despite her significant research she did not realise how her own reading had been affected until the negative effects were clearly evident (p. 97). She had increasingly come to depend on online summaries for what she knew she should read in more detail in the future, became overwhelmed with deep and substantial newspapers and periodicals, and no longer read the books at her bedside which she'd previously looked forward to because she processed her email instead (pp. 97–98). When she did read books she tended to “read *in* them, rather than being whisked away *by* them” (ibid.). Without noticing it at the time, she had “begun to read more to be informed than to be immersed, much less to be transported” (p. 98).

Wolf, a prominent scholar and expert reader, was unaware of the gradual decline of her reflective faculties (p. 201). Because this process occurs slowly we may not notice “the insidious narrowing of our own thinking, the imperceptible shortening of our attention to complex issues, the unsuspected diminishing of our ability to write, read, or think past 140 characters” that can result (pp. 201–2). Her experience teaches us to reflect on how our own reading has changed over time (p. 202).

She analysed her situation by attempting to reread a childhood favourite which was both linguistically and conceptually chal-

lenging (pp. 98–9). She could not: the style seemed opaque and the pace impossibly slow (p. 99). She attempted to consciously read it slowly, but had become so accustomed to reading rapidly on the Internet that she was unable to slow down enough to comprehend the material (*ibid.*). So superficial and swift was her reading that she became frustrated at being unable to grasp deeper levels of meaning and complex language—deep-reading no longer felt possible (p. 100). She gave up. When she forced herself to return to this task she read in concentrated, twenty-minute sessions, and the book took her two weeks to finish (p. 101). Afterwards she felt, finally, “home again”, back to herself (*ibid.*). Now, her reading pace matched the book’s pace: she moderated her speed to match the action (*ibid.*).

Another potential difficulty modern readers face involves reading on digital devices. Wolf describes our understanding of the impact of screens, such as ebook readers, versus printed books, as incomplete. Screen reading appears to “encourage skimming, skipping, and browsing”, but also the screen’s lack of the concrete, spatial dimension of printed books may impair our ability to sequence information and remember detail (p. 78). Readers need awareness of their spatio-temporal location in the book such that they can return to challenging passages and learn from them, yet lack this on digital devices (*ibid.*). A specific concern is that our loss of tactile involvement in screen reading changes how we approach words and understand them in the text as a whole (p. 79). It’s been posited that the sensory aspect of reading in print adds a redundancy, a “geometry”, to words which aids our understanding (*ibid.*). Wolf, however, is not against reading digitally; she publicly advocates for digital tablets as a

means for reducing non-literacy, for example (p. 12).

The rapid speed of information processing associated with screen reading unconsciously bleeds over to our other reading (p. 80). Especially when much of this time involves the distracting environment of the Internet, “where sequential thinking is less important and less used”, we begin to read that way even when we read printed material or want to read deeply (ibid.). This is presumably what Woolf experienced.

There is a “digital chain” linking the proliferation of information we now consume, the “gruel-thin, eye-byte servings consumed daily”, the quality, quantity, content, of what we read, and our motivation for reading, which imposes a tax on us which we’ve yet to fully tally (pp. 72, 85) When we create technologies to “gainsay our perceptual and intellectual limits” our capacities for attention and memory are altered (p. 204). Wolf worries that the “very plasticity of a reading brain that reflects the characteristics of digital media” could “precipitate the atrophy of our most essential thought processes—critical analysis, empathy, and reflection—to the detriment of our democratic society” (pp. 203–4). Reading is a political act because as we became less able to fully employ these faculties, we become less able to dispassionately evaluate how those who would govern us think (p. 199).

Wolf sees no quick fixes for breaking this chain, but identifies “lives that propel and sustain” good readers (p. 13). The good reader embodies the life of knowledge and productivity; the life of entertainment and leisure; and the life of contemplation (ibid.). We are awash in the first life, the acquisition of information and knowledge (p. 189). Likewise, the second life that transports us out of our everyday life contains an abundance

of “reading’s varied forms of entertainment” (p. 190).

It is the third life that is under threat (p. 13). This reflective domain is where reading enables critical thinking and responsible decision making (pp. 197–198). It is the habitat of our inner selves, a “suspended joy” we enter when we leave our surface self behind and temporarily transcend time (p. 194). But this does not happen at random, and is not reached by a happy-go-lucky temperament; it is achieved by the reader who makes the time and effortful intention (ibid.). Sustaining this faculty is not a given: we must protect and nurture our third life in order to retain our collective intelligence, compassion, and wisdom, and pass this on to future generations (pp. 191, 13).

This requires that we learn a stronger capacity for “cognitive patience” (p. 46). Wolf uses the phrase *festina lente* (“hurry slowly”) to suggest how we may experience this meditative dimension more consciously by “knowing how to quiet the eye and allow your thoughts to settle and be still, poised for what will follow” (p. 193). *Festina lente* releases us from the now common, stunted way of reading: “fast if you can, slowly if you must” (ibid.). To hurry slowly is “to recover a rhythm of time that allows you to attend with consciousness and intention. You read quickly (*festina*), till you are conscious (*lente*) of the thoughts to comprehend, the beauty to appreciate, the questions to remember, and, when fortunate, the insights to unfold” (ibid.). This functions as a metaphor for how our reading brain should work: “we decode automatically until perception becomes transformed into concepts, when time becomes consciously slowed, and our whole self becomes suffused by the mental cascade where thought and feeling converge” (p. 194).

Our goal in deep reading is “to be continuously engaged in trying to reach and express our best thoughts so as to expand an ever truer, more beautiful understanding of the universe and to lead lives based on this vision” (p. 203). Hurrying slowly we may learn to extract knowledge from information, and transform knowledge into wisdom (p. 202). In this way a society’s good readers “are both its canaries—which detect the presence of danger to its members—and its guardians of our common humanity” (ibid.).

## **Wollstonecraft, Mary (1759-1797)**

Mary Wollstonecraft was an English writer and philosopher.

Wollstonecraft's passion for self-education ran through her life like a "red thread" (Pedersen 2010, 31). She read non-fiction widely, wrote about the education of women, and translated books in two languages—which she had also taught herself (Sireci 2018, 284). Having succeeded in her own education, she encouraged her peers to do likewise, demonstrating how they could use books more effectively (Pedersen 2010, 35).

Sireci sets the scene: "In eighteenth-century print culture, there was much talk of impressionable female readers and flocks of young female writers who imitated literary fads" (2018). Wollstonecraft argued that other, male, writers were also "swayed by impulse and emotion, and sometimes by powerful forebears, but unlike the naïve young female characters appearing everywhere, they have the power to impose their thinking upon others" (p. 259). They are "weak vessels", "serving as passive channels through which linguistic and cultural codes flow without resistance" (pp. 259, 248 (quoted in)). Wollstonecraft suggested "that while a particular text might be a reflection of an author's passions and weaknesses, these passions and weaknesses are in turn symptoms of cultural influences, which include other texts" (p. 245). We are what we read.

Wollstonecraft's arguments for this point were themselves an example of how critical reading should be conducted. She succeeds in this by "developing a self-reflexive mode of reading that uncovers and exploits the ironies of its own critical foundations" (Palumbo 2011). In her work entitled

*Rights of Woman*, for example, she (Sireci 2018, 245):

organized a large amount of material, which she calls “illustrations.” Upon a broad canvas of over 452 pages...Wollstonecraft closely reads and compares passages within and between books, inserts text of various lengths, places supporting material in footnotes, and creates lengthy parodies of well-known works. These techniques allow her to sustain debates with a number of authors simultaneously...

She assumed that the author’s state of mind was reflected in their work (ibid.). Through close, critical reading, analysis of author intent, and her own evaluative criteria, she conducted political and social literary criticism (p. 265). She demonstrated by example how rhetorical analysis could contribute to improving the political situation of women (p. 247).

Novels, on the other hand, often hindered women’s political self-realisation. Wollstonecraft frequently denounced imaginative literature as tending (Wollstonecraft 2009, 137):

to make women the creatures of sensation...their character is thus formed in the mould of folly during the time they are acquiring accomplishments, the only improvement they are excited, by their station in society, to acquire. This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain...

She urged women to reject the “stale tales ... retailed in

sentimental jargon”, and read to challenge the authority of conventional knowledge (Palumbo 2011). A clue that this criticism of novels was more nuanced than it may appear is that Wollstonecraft wrote and published novels herself. Her argument was that women’s lack of education combined with their restricted social roles left them particularly vulnerable to the sentimentalism popular fiction espoused, and naïvely accepting of what these books implied about the world. This sentimentality—a “romantic twist of the mind”—occurs when women, “subjected by ignorance to their sensations”, are only taught to look for happiness through love and refine their sensual feelings (Wollstonecraft 2009, 281). This tends to corrupt their taste (*ibid.*). The credulity of these women stemmed from their inability to read critically, rendering them unable to observe that popular fiction inculcated and strengthened harmful gender-stereotypes. Wollstonecraft intended her novels to avoid both of these risks, and provide progressive female exemplars.

Wollstonecraft cautioned against the reading of popular novels so that women would read something superior: books which both improve their understanding and regulate their imagination (pp. 282–3). This passionate belief that the lot of the disenfranchised can be improved in this way continues to resound. Wollstonecraft reminds us that unreflective reading can have significantly negative effects on our character without us necessarily being aware. At the least we should ask whether the stereotypes—the linguistic and cultural codes—popularised in the fiction we read are accurate or teaching us prejudice. We protect ourselves from these harmful influences and learn how to benefit from texts by practising critical analysis.



## Woolf, Virginia (1882-1941)

Woolf was an English author and literary critic.

Independence is the reader's vital quality: "take no advice, ... follow your own instincts, ... use your own reason, ... come to your own conclusions" (Woolf 1960, 234). From Woolf, a Bloomsbury individualist, a feminist denied the university education of her male peers, this defence of the "common reader" is passionate: "literature both past and present must rest in the hands of the people who continue to read it" (Woolf 1979). Our "spirit of freedom" is destroyed by allowing authorities to "tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read" (Woolf 1960, 234). So, in *How Should One Read a Book?* Woolf eschews dogmatism, and could well be asking this question of herself.

Before we read, she suggests, we should open our minds as wide as can, attempting to banish the preconceptions we have of fiction being true, poetry, false, biography, flattering, etc (p. 235). By criticising too early we deprive ourselves of the "fullest possible value" of what we read (ibid.). Woolf exhorts the reader: "Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice" (ibid.).

Reading authors' biographies and memoirs can help "light up the many windows of the past; we can watch the famous dead in their familiar habits and fancy sometimes that we are very close and can surprise their secrets", then read their work and ask whether it reads differently (p. 238). But it is up to us to decide how much credence to give to an interpretation of the author, and to what extent we should allow our sympathies and antipathies toward the author to influence our read-

ing (pp. 238–239).

These genres can increase our familiarity with authors, but also exercise our creativity (p. 239). Woolf describes as “rubbish reading” the scavenging of a literature’s rubbish heap—“its record of vanished moments and forgotten lives told in faltering and feeble accents that have perished”—to “find rings and scissors and broken noses buried in the huge past and try to piece them together” (ibid.). These “relics of human life that have been cast out to moulder” can overcome the reader: sentences can suggest vistas, visions, that can absorb us as if written by a great novelist (ibid.). Reading these lesser books, or even “rubbish”, can be absorbing, but is ultimately negligible: we come to tire of it because such authors “lack the artist’s power of mastering and eliminating” (pp. 239–240).

To better understand this power, “what a novelist is doing”, another creative approach to understanding is to experiment with the dangers and difficulties of writing (p. 235). The time to read poetry is when we can almost write it (p. 240).

In the first phase of the reading process we receive impressions with an understanding, open mind: we are sympathetic and friendly to the author (p. 241). But when we read we cannot sympathise or immerse ourselves entirely because “there is always a demon in us who whispers, ‘I hate, I love,’ and we cannot silence him”, and “we cannot suppress our own idiosyncrasy without impoverishing it” (p. 243). Instead, the demon must be educated: we train our taste to develop our critical faculty. This is the second phase of the reading process: we judge severely the impressions which we receive (p. 242).

Continuing “reading without the book before you” helps so-

lidity these fleeting impressions we receive in the first phase (pp. 242–3). It occurs indirectly, after we've finished with the book and had chance to reflect (p. 242). This is indirect because (ibid.):

the book will return, but differently. It will float to the top of the mind as a whole. And the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phrases. Details now fit themselves into their places. We see the shape from start to finish.

As our taste develops we become better at recognising these shapes. Having lasciviously consumed books of all types, pausing to observe the incongruity of the world, our taste begins to change, becoming less greedy and more reflective (p. 243). It draws our attention to qualities common to certain books: if we listen, we hear it say “what shall we call *this*” (ibid.)? We learn to judge: to classify, to pinpoint value, to locate where it succeeds and fails (ibid.). We're led beyond the book we're reading to more general qualities that group it with others. We give these names and infer rules which order our perceptions, and as our faculty of discrimination becomes keener, we feel pleasure (p. 244).

Criticism is the comparison of “each book with the greatest of its kind” (p. 242). When we do this with new titles, their novelty is only a superficial quality, meaning that we need only slightly alter the standards we derived from the old (ibid.). Making illuminating comparisons requires reading widely and with sufficient understanding: to properly do justice to a book is a complex art involving imagination, insight, and judgement in their rarest form (pp. 243–4).

It may be tempting to allow the professional critic to do this work, to “decide the question of the book’s absolute value for us”, but this is impossible because our relationship to literature is so intimate, so personal (p. 243). The role of the critic is to “light up and solidify the vague ideas that have been tumbling in the misty depths of our minds” (p. 244). We can only understand their judgements that conflict with, and vanquish, our own, which means that we must come to them with questions and notions we developed honestly by reading alone (ibid.). Critics “can do nothing for us if we herd ourselves under their authority and lie down like sheep in the shade of a hedge” (ibid.). Professional criticism, therefore, is useful to the extent that we have already critiqued a book ourselves, compared it with others, and generated questions. We retain our independence as readers, honour our responsibilities, by coming to the critic with our reflections, and using the criticism to develop our taste further.

Opinions of people reading slowly, for the love of it, with both great sympathy and severity, contribute to the standards set for current authors (pp. 244–5). Despite not reading with an end in mind, ordinary readers may nevertheless influence writers to create stronger, richer, and more varied work (p. 245). This is, however, just a fortunate side effect of our reading: ultimately reading is a pursuit of good in itself, a pleasure that is final (ibid.).

## **Xi, Zhu (1130–1200)**

Xi was a philosopher and historian of the Southern Song dynasty.

There are two paths to reading. It can be done for the sake of others, which “is like our having food but, rather than eating it ourselves, simply placing it outside the door so that others know our household has it” (Chu 1990, 110). This won’t lead to a text affecting you, so the second path is to read for your own sake—to understand “the essence of things and affairs firsthand” for yourself (*ibid.*). This is the way of disinterested, self-cultivation with no lofty ambition, and what Xi recommends. His particular form of self-cultivation was focused on embodying the rational, Confucian moral principle, but his advice applies to serious study in general.

Reading, then, is not a mere academic exercise or route to career advancement. Instead, it is the primary means to investigate things and extend knowledge in the service of improving your actions. We understand a text when we recognise its principles in ourselves and then act upon them (p. 135):

you must first become intimately familiar with the text so that its words seem to come from your own mouth. Then you must reflect on it so that its ideas seem to come from your own mind. Only then can there be real understanding.

We reach this understanding with the formula: “Study extensively, inquire carefully, ponder thoroughly, sift clearly, and practice earnestly”, with each step being sequential and essential (p. 29).

Xi devised a curriculum of Confucianism which formed the basis of the educational structure of later imperial China (p. ix). It elevated four canonical texts above all others, which were compiled with Xi's commentaries (p. 8). He insisted on a specific order of study, moving from simpler to more complex ideas. These four texts provided the moral principles and historical texts illustrated the past consequences of applying the principles. Both were necessary because genuinely understanding a principle requires understanding it in practice, but the abstract principle must be understood first (p. 40). Unless you first understand the core principles of a subject "your mind will have no measuring-stick and thus will be frequently misled" (ibid.). The order in which we read books about a given topic is important, so if we lack a curriculum we should consider adopting one.

Just as the curriculum had an inherent order, so did each of Xi's prescribed texts (pp. 44–5):

Each section, chapter, and line [of a text] is in its proper order; this order cannot be disturbed...  
When you don't yet understand what precedes,  
don't venture to what follows; when you haven't yet comprehended this, don't venture to set your mind on that.

You move through a text linearly from beginning to end. Reading is not to be rushed: "If we chew slowly, the flavor lasts. If we take big bites and big gulps, in the end we don't know the flavor" (p. 137). This patient lingering extends to not explicitly aiming to finish a book, not always thinking about moving forward, not thinking of gain. If you're obsessed with the idea of completing the book, your mind

is fixated on the last page, rather than seeking to understand the work's lessons (p. 141). In fact, you should take almost the opposite approach: "Only if you don't relish the idea of moving on to read another paragraph will you apprehend [the one paragraph you are reading]" (Ng 2020, 54). It is pleasurable to discover the meaning, and this feeling suggests your familiarity with what you've read. The "greatest failing is to strive for quantity"; what matters is true understanding, complete familiarity with the text (Chu 1990, 43). Read slowly, patiently, and methodically.

"Learning is reciting", so to read is an interplay of recital and pondering (pp. 138–9). This is distinct from rote memorisation, though. The idea is that by learning the text off by heart you can think about it at length when you do not have the book to hand, and that understanding results from this reflective practice. Xi "called for students to recite each text over and over again until they no longer saw it as 'other'": "even fifty or a hundred readings was not too many" (p. 45). This is a gruelling endeavour, but "If the effort exerted is great, understanding is extensive. When understanding is extensive, its utility is lasting and assured." (Ng 2020, 54). Xi exhorts (Chu 1990, 130):

Arouse your spirit, keep your body upright, and don't fret, as though a dagger and a sword were at your back! Be most thoroughgoing in penetrating even one passage. Hit its head and the tail will respond; hit its tail and the head will respond. Only then is reading done right.

This is an unrelenting process that leaves indelible, painful traces (ibid.):

Here's what is necessary: one blow with a club,  
one scar; one slap on the face, a handful of blood.  
Your reading of what other people write should  
be just like this. Don't be lax!

This intensity involves critical cunning, detective work (Ng 2020, 55):

Reading texts and words is like catching a thief.  
You must reconstruct the details of the crime,  
including stolen items worth no more than a  
penny. If only the general outline [of the theft]  
is portrayed, even though you know who the  
thief is, you will still not know where the theft  
was committed

Yet we should moderate our reading programme so that we don't exhaust our strength: "If you are able to read two hundred characters, read only one hundred, but on those one hundred make a truly fierce effort." (Chu 1990, 132–3). "If today you are able to read a page, read half a page; read that half page over and over with all your strength. Only if you read both halves of the page in this manner will you become intimately familiar with the page." (p. 132). That is, we develop moderation through habit (Ng 2020, 57):

Reading cannot be done without establishing the limit at the outset. [It] should be managed like farm work, where the farms have boundaries. Such is also the case in the pursuit of learning. Today's scholars do not realize this principle, so that when they first start, they are tremendously eager. But then they become



gradually slothful, and in the end, they pay no attention whatsoever. This is all because there is no setting of the limit at the very outset.

Learning in this way is a long-term process so the habits we develop must be maintainable without being unhealthy or ineffective—the notion of thorough, methodical study pervades Xi's advice.

We must approach the text with reverential attention: a calm and peaceful mind, free from distractions. Practically, this begins with our environment: "Shut the door, close the gate, and cut off the four accesses" (p. 55). This state of mind primarily involves mental discipline and concentration, but is aided by certain physical attitudes (Chu 1990, 172):

The head should be upright, the eyes looking straight ahead, the feet steady, the hands respectful, the mouth quiet and composed, the bearing solemn—these are all aspects of inner mental attentiveness

We may note the similarities with a meditation posture. Indeed, Xi suggested we spend "half-day quiet sitting and half-day reading books" (Chan 1987, 27). The meditative aspect presumably helps settle the mind so that it "becomes like still water or a clear mirror" (Chu 1990, 48). Failing to prepare ourselves in this way means that even if we read, we won't comprehend or remember because mentally we remain in the previous context.

Our minds must be still and also open, free of preconceptions about what the text will say (p. 46). We must "scrub clean the mind, then read" (p. 146). If we begin with preconceived ideas

we'll read them into the text, and the text will merely confirm them. So we must be willing to doubt not only the text but also ourselves: "if you have no doubts, encourage them. And if you do have doubts, get rid of them." (p. 151).

We can't force our meaning on the text because, for Xi, the meaning is objective (pp. 55–56). To access this meaning we must mentally place ourselves within the historical context of the text, empathise with the author, and examine their motives for writing. We must become the text. We should let it enter our mind and blend with it, until we're in perfect accord (p. 129).

The ideal reader, then, limits the scope of their curriculum, works through its texts gradually, sequentially, and methodically to the point of intimate familiarity. They achieve self-cultivation by fully internalising the principles to the extent that they are infused in their being and therefore in their action. Xi offers students three dicta, summing up his approach to reading (p. 132):

1. "read little but become intimately familiar with what you read";
2. "don't scrutinize the text, developing your own far-fetched views of it, but rather personally experience it over and over again";
3. "concentrate fully, without thought of gain."

We may ask whether there are texts we would like to read that Xi's methodology could illuminate—what would it mean to read in this reverential, meditative manner?

## References

- Abrams, M. H. 1989. *Doing Things with Texts*. W.W Norton & Company.
- Adler, Mortimer J., and Charles Van Doren. 1972. *How to Read a Book*. Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Anthony, Katharine. 1921. *Margaret Fuller: A Psychological Biography*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Bacon, Francis. 1879. *The Works of Francis Bacon: Vol VII*. Edited by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath. Longmans & Co.
- Bacon, Francis. 1985. *Francis Bacon: The Essays*. Penguin Books.
- Bain, Alexander. 1884. *Practical Essays. The Art of Study*. Aberdeen University Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1977. Translated by Stephen Heath. Fontana Press.
- Bayard, Pierre. 2007. *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. Granta Books.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2015. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zorn. The Bodly Head.
- Bloom, Harold. 1994. *The Western Canon*. Harcourt Brace and Co.
- Bloom, Harold. 2001. *How to Read and Why*. Simon and Schuster.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1998. *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. Penguin.
- Boswell, James. *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Random House, Inc.
- Calvino, Italo. 1998. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Translated by William Weaver. Vintage.

- Calvino, Italo. 1999. *Why Read the Classics?* Translated by Martin McLaughlin. Pantheon Books.
- Carlyle, Thomas. 1866. Inaugural Address at Edinburgh, April 2nd, 1866. Edmonston and Douglas; Chapman and Hall.
- Carlyle, Thomas. 1885. Critical and Miscellaneous Essays. *Goethe's Helena*. D. Appleton and Company.
- Carroll, Lewis. 1907. Feeding the Mind. Chatto & Windus.
- Carroll, Lewis. 1958. Symbolic Logic. *Introduction. To Learners*. Dover Publications.
- Chan, Wing-Tsit. 1987. *Chu Hsi: Life and Thought*. The Chinese University Press; St Martin's Press.
- Cherki, Alice. 2006. *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*. Translated by Nadia Benabid. Cornell University Press.
- Chu, Hsi. 1990. Learning to be a Sage. Edited by Daniel K. Gardner. Translated by Daniel K. Gardner. University of California Press.
- Collingwood, R. G. 1939. *An Autobiography*. Oxford University Press.
- D'Israeli, Issac. 1796. Miscellanies; Or, Literary Recreations. In *On Reading*. T. Cadell and W. Davies.
- Davies, Robertson. 1998. The Merry Heart. Penguin.
- Eco, Umberto. 1979. *The Role of the Reader*. Indiana University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1981. The Theory of Signs and the Role of the Reader 14. Midwest Modern Language Association.
- Eco, Umberto. 1988. *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*. Harvard University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1989. *Foucault's Pendulum*. Translated by William Weaver. Guild Publishing.
- Eco, Umberto. 1990. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Indiana

- University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 2004a. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Harvard University Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 2004b. *On Literature*. Harcourt, Inc.
- Eco, Umberto. 2014b. *The Name of the Rose*. Mariner Books.
- Eco, Umberto. 2014a. *Chronicles of a Liquid Society*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Eco, Umberto. 2015. *How to Write a Thesis*. The MIT Press.
- Eilenberger, Wolfram. 2020. Time of the Magicians: Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer, Heidegger, and the decade that reinvented philosophy. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. Penguin Press.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1912. Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters. *Books*. The Riverside Press, Cambridge.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 2015. Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose. In *The American Scholar*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson. Harvard University Press.
- Emre, Merve. 2023. The Worlds of Italo Calvino, February 27.
- Evans, Robert C. 1995. *Habits of Mind*. Associated University Presses.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skins, White Masks*. Pluto Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2016. *Voices of Liberation*. Edited by Leo Zeilig. Haymarket Books.
- Felski, Rita. 2008. *Uses of Literature*. blackwell.
- Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Harvard University Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 1958. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*. Princeton University Press.

- Frye, Northrop. 1964. *The Educated Imagination*. Indiana University Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2000a. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton University Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2000b. *Northrop Frye's Writings on Education*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2000c. *Northrop Frye on Religion Excluding The Great Code and Words with Power*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2002a. *Northrop Frye on Literature and Society, 1936-1989: Unpublished Papers*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2002b. *The "Third Book" Notebooks of Northrop Frye, 1964-1972: The Critical Comedy*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2003c. *Northrop Frye on Modern Culture*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2003a. *Northrop Frye's Notebooks and Lectures on the Bible and Other Religious Texts*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2003b. *Northrop Frye on Canada*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2006b. *The Secular Scripture and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1976-1991*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2006a. *The Educated Imagination and Other Writings on Critical Theory 1933-1963*. Edited by Germaine Warkentin. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2007a. *Northrop Frye's Notebooks for Anatomy of Criticism*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2007b. *Northrop Frye's Fiction and Miscel-*

- aneous Writings. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2008b. Interviews with Northrop Frye. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2008a. *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of The Bible and Literature*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2009. *Critical Path and Other Writings on Critical Theory*. University of Toronto Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 2010. Northrop Frye's Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance. University of Toronto Press.
- Fuller, Margaret. 2001. *"My heart is a large kingdom": Selected Letters of Margaret Fuller*. Cornell University Press.
- Fuller, S. Margaret. 1846. Papers on Literature and Art. Wiley & Putnam.
- Fung, Lisa. 2021. The power of language. U.C Irvine School of Humanities.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2013. *Truth & Method*.
- Gallop, Jane. 2000. The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters.
- Gibbon, Edward. 2006. *Memoirs of My Life and Writings*. BiblioBazaar.
- Hare, Julius Charles. 1867. *Guesses at Truth by Two Brothers*. Macmillan and Co.
- Harrison, Frederic. 1893. *The Choice of Books*. MacMillan and Co.
- Helps, Arthur. Friends in Council. *Reading*. Parker Son and Bourn West Strand.
- Hesse, Herman. 1978. *My Belief*. Translated by Denver Lindley and Ralph Manheim. Triad/Panther Books.
- hooks, bell. 2010. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. Routledge.

- Hudis, Peter. 2015. *Revolutionary Lives: Frantz Fanon*. Pluto Press.
- Interpreting R. G. Collingwood. 2025. *Revisiting Gadamer's Critique of Collingwood*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, Holbrook. 1946. *The Reading of Books*. Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Johnson, Samuel. 1825a. No 74. *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D (IV): The Adventurer and Idler*. Talboys and Wheeler; and W. Pickering, London.
- Johnson, Samuel. 1825b. No 70. *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D (IV): The Adventurer and Idler*. Talboys and Wheeler; and W. Pickering, London.
- Johnson, Samuel. 1825c. 58. Presumption of modern criticism censured. Ancient Poetry necessarily obscure. Examples from Horace. *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D (IV): The Adventurer and Idler*. Talboys and Wheeler; and W. Pickering, London.
- Johnson, Samuel. 1968. No. 137. Writers not a useless generation. Edited by W. J. Bate. *Selected Essays from the Rambler, Adventuer, and Idler*. Yale University Press.
- Johnson, Samuel. 2010. Dryden. Edited by John H. Mordendordf. *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (vol. 21): The Lives of the Poets*. Yale University Press.
- Johnson, Samuel. The reasons why advice is generally ineffectual. *The Rambler in Four Volumes*. J. Walker (Harrison's Collection).
- Johnson, Samuel. A project for the employment of authors. *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D (V): Miscellaneous Pieces*. Talboys and Wheeler; and W. Pickering, London.
- Jonson, Ben. 1953. *Timber; or, Discoveries*. Syracuse University Press.



- Jonson, Ben. 1966. *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Jonson, Ben. 1988. *The Complete Poems*. Penguin.
- Kaplan, David M., ed. 2008. *Reading Ricoeur*. State University of New York Press.
- Karolides, Nicholas J., and Louise M. Rosenblatt. 1999. *Theory and Practice: An Interview with Louise M. Rosenblatt*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- King, Peter. 1929. *The Life of John Locke*. Henry Colburn.
- Lawn, Chris. 2006. *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum.
- Lowell, James Russell. 1887. *Democracy and Other Addresses. Books and Libraries*. Houghton, Mifflin and Company.
- Macey, David. 2001. *Frantz Fanon: A Life*. Granta.
- McClean, David E. 2014. *Richard Rorty, Liberalism and Cosmopolitanism*. Pickering & Chatto.
- McLeod, Melvin. 1998. *There's No Place to Go But Up — bell hooks and Maya Angelou in conversation*. Lion's Roar.
- Mendelsund, Peter. 2014. *What We See When We Read*. Vintage Books.
- Mendelsund, Peter, and Christopher King. 2014. *Bomb Magazine*.
- Mendelsund, Peter, and Steve Kroeter. 2014. *Designers & Books*.
- Miller, Henry. 1969. *The Books in My Life*. New Directions.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 2002. *On Literature*. Routledge.
- Montaigne, Michel de. 1980. *The Complete Works of Montaigne*. Translated by Donald M. Frame. Stanford University Press.

- Morley, John. 1891. *Studies in Literature. On the Study of Literature*. Macmillan and Co.
- Morrison, Toni. 1994. *Playing in the Dark*. Harvard University Press.
- Morrison, Toni. 2006. The Reader as Artist. O, The Oprah Magazine.
- Morrison, Toni. 2008. *Toni Morrison: Conversations*. The University Press of Mississippi.
- Morrison, Toni. 2020. *The Source of Self Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. Vintage Books.
- Motte, Warren. 2011. *Pierre Bayard's Wormholes*. New Prairie Press. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1751>.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. 1980. *Lectures on Literature*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Ng, On-cho. 2020. Zhu Xi's Hermeneutics. In *Dao Companion to Zhu Xi's Philosophy*, ed. Kai-chiu Ng and Yong Huang. Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29175-4>.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1991. *Decolonising the Mind*. James Currey Ltd.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2012. *Globalectics*. Columbia University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1910. *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions; Homer and Classical Philology*. Edited by Oscar Levy.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2005. *Daybreak*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2007. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2008. *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

- Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2013. *Human, All Too Human II and Unpublished Fragments*. Stanford University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2017. *The Will to Power*. Penguin Random House.
- Olson, Gary A. 1994. bell hooks and the Politics of Literacy: A Conversation. *Journal of Advanced Composition*.
- Palumbo, David M. 2011. *Mary Wollstonecraft, Jonathan Swift, and the Passion in Reading*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Parks, Tim. 2014. *Where I'm Reading From*. Vintage.
- Parks, Tim. 2015. *The Novel: A Survival Skill*. Oxford University Press.
- Parks, Tim. 2016. *Life and Work*. Yale University Press.
- Parks, Tim. 2019. *Pen in Hand*. Alma Books.
- Pearson, Jesse. 2008. Harold Bloom. Vice News.
- Pedersen, Joyce Senders. 2010. Women and Agency: The Educational Legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft. *Women, Education, and Agency, 1600–2000*. Routledge.
- Piozzi, Hesther Lynch. 1932. *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson*. Cambridge At The University Press.
- Planck, Max. 1949. *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*. Philosophical Library, New York.
- Popper, Karl. 2005. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Routledge Classics.
- Richardson Jr., Robert D. 1995. *The Mind on Fire*. University of California Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1976. *Interpretation Theory*. TCU Press.
- Robinson, David M. 2013. Margaret Fuller, Self-culture, and Associationism. In *Margaret Fuller and Her Circles*, ed. Brigitte Bailey, Katheryn P. Viens, and Conrad Edick

- Wright. Univesity of New Hampshire Press.
- Robinson, Francis P. 1961. *Effective Study*. Harper & Brothers.
- Rorty, Richard. 1982. *Consequences of pragmatism*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, Jonathan. 2018. *Reader's Liberation*. Oxford University Press.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. 1976. *Literature as Exploration*. 3rd ed. Noble and Noble.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. 1994. *The reader, the text, the poem: the transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rundell, Katherine. 2019. *Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise*. Ebook. Bloomsbury.
- Ruskin, John. 1971. Things to be Studied. In *The Elements of Drawing*. Dover Publications, Inc.
- Ruskin, John. Lecture I: Sesame. Of Kings' Treasuries. In *Sesame and Lilies*. Collins' Clear-Type Press.
- Santelli, Mauro. 2020. Redescribing Final Vocabularies.
- Sattelmeyer, Robert. 1988. *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History*. Princeton University Press.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1974. *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*. Translated by E.F.J Payne. Oxford University Press Press.
- Scott-Baumann, Alison. 2009. *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*. Continuum.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably

- Think This Essay Is About You. In *Touching Feeling*. Duke University Press.
- Self, Will. 2022. *Why Read*. Grove Press.
- Shockey, Nathan. 2020. *The Typographic Imagination*. Columbia University Press.
- Simms, Karl. 2015. *Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Routledge.
- Sireci, Fiore. 2018. "Writers Who Have Rendered Women Objects of Pity": Mary Wollstonecraft's Literary Criticism in the Analytical Review and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.
- Sommer, Andreas Urs. 2019. What Nietzsche Did and Did Not Read. *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1966. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
- Sontag, Susan. 1993. Literature Is What You Should Re-Read: An Interview With Susan Sontag. Spirit of Bosnia.
- Sontag, Susan. 1995. *Conversations with Susan Sontag*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Sontag, Susan. 2007. *At the Same Time: essays and speeches*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sontag, Susan. 2008. *Reborn: journals and notebooks, 1947-1963*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Stanislaw, Lem. 1986. *One Human Minute*. Translated by Catherine S. Leach. Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2007. *The Black Swan*. Allen Lane.
- The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel. 2003. In *Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco: postmodern masters*. Cambridge University Press.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 1962a. The Journal of Henry David

- Thoreau: Vols. I - VII. Dover Publications.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 1962b. *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau: Vols. VIII - XIV*. Dover Publications.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 1983. *The Illustrated A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Princeton University Press.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 1996. *Walden*. Longmeadow Press.
- Ulin, David L. 2010. *The Lost Art of Reading*. Sasquatch Books.
- Wakely-Mulroney, Katherine. Lewis Carroll's Taxonomy of Reading. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bh.2018.0006>.
- Weinsheimer, Joel. 1985. *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*. Yale University Press.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1968. *Literary Criticism of Oscar Wilde*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1997. *The Critic as Artist*. Green Integer Books.
- Wolf, Maryanne. 2018. *Reader, Come Home*. Harper-Collins.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. 2009. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men; with, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, and Hints*. Cambridge University Press.
- Woodbury, Charles J. 1974. *Talks with Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Folcroft Library Editions.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1960. *The Second Common Reader*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1979. *Byron and Mr Briggs*. The Yale Review.