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ON READING

I've changed the focus of my announced topic. When Jim asked me last summer to speak I thought I'd be cute and I chose a title that borrows a little swagger from Harold Bloom's much touted HOW TO READ A BOOK AND WHY (2000). But brilliant as that is in parts, the book is also about how to read Harold Bloom and why. And anyway, self-help manuals--of which the bookstores nowadays seem clotted, --especially those on sex--always promise more than they can deliver.

So my topic tonight is really ON READING, and while poetry is primary to it, my aim is less to advise how to read than to explore why we read at all. I dedicate my essay to the memory of a good reader, our late good friend Dick Campbell.

Reading being one of the most rewarding pleasures of later life, it is worth reflecting on how and why that is so. Well, for one thing, we are better readers than we've ever been. We have more experience. We're more reflective. We've been around the block and what we read about life and love and death--whether in fiction or reality or history--seems familiar and a part of our world. We seem to be re-reading, and indeed that's what we do more and more in later life. Much of our reading then is a form of re-reading because much that we read is only a retelling. The greatest

books--the Bible and Homer and Dante and Shakespeare-- are classics because they remain inexhaustibly re-readable.

Then too we are more selective. We are more wary, skeptical, know what we like, and do not suffer fakes and fools gladly. We read of course for information, for knowledge, and for wisdom. Our challenge, as T.S. Eliot has said, is to know the difference between them. In later life we are more concerned with values than with things, with integrity and wholeness rather than power. I think one reason for the great appeal to readers of David McCulloh's fine current book on John Adams--besides its being first-class history--is the solidity and wholeness, the integrity of John and Abigail, and of Jefferson, and of their great humanity in their times. In the book selective wisdom shines through the pertinent information and knowledge.

And in later life we are more creative readers. I don't mean that we've become literary critics. Indeed no. Sadly, in the past twenty years or so, I think much literary teaching and criticism has become esoteric and estranged and inscrutable almost as Sanskrit or Linear B. It has given reading a bad name. Given the decline of reading in the electronic age, reading doesn't need that kind of help.

But I'm not throwing in the towel. I think the past 50 years of mass education has widened the scope of genuine reading. Reading, after all, has a history of only about a three thousand years anyway. And mass reading--the so-called

common reader--has a history of only about 250 years. In Milton's day, Dr. Johnson reminds us, women were not commonly readers, the culture of course not capacity the reason. (Think only of all those smart women in Shakespeare). When Bacon wrote memorably "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man, and writing an exact man" he meant "full" in the old English sense of complete, satisfying, richly stored. But he also meant "man" in the masculine. By Johnson's time a century or so later reading and writing had become widely shared.

Dr. Johnson's great dictionary of 1755 being the hallmark of that age, it is worth attending to his words on reading. There is a powerful image of the great man reading, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds (ca.1775). It shows a book clutched firmly in his fingers, like talons, the cover and pages bent back roughly, thrust up close to his good eye, his rapt attention possessing it. Observed a friend, "he gets at the substance of a book directly; he tears the heart out of it" (LIFE, ed. G.B. Hill, Oxford, 1887, III, 284).

Probably no one before or after Dr. Johnson had read as wisely and well in ancient and modern literature as he, and that was only one of the wonders of his genius that make his biography by Boswell still the best ever written.

Johnson commented once how strange it was there was "so little reading in the world and so much writing. People in

general do not willingly read, if they can have anything else to amuse them" (LIFE, IV, 218). Still, we should read mainly from inclination and desire, from curiosity, for what we read then we will remember (LIFE, III, 193). Conversation, he told Boswell, was good for the mind but "The foundation must be laid by reading. General principles must be had from books.... In conversation you never get a system" (LIFE, III, 361). Late in life he advised Mrs. Thrale to read diligently: "they who do not read can have nothing to think, and little to say; when you can get proper company talk freely and cheerfully, it is often by talking that we come to know the value of what we have read..." (LETTERS, ed. Redford, III, 228). (That, I take it, is what a classroom is all about.)

Speaking of reading and old age, Johnson declared, "It is a man's own fault, it is from want of use, if his mind grows torpid in old age." Someone rashly suggested maybe it was a happy thing if insensibility came upon an old man. "No, sir," said Johnson with noble disdain, "I should never be happy by being less rational" (LIFE,III, 254).

Especially attractive I find Johnson's thought upon visiting the sacred ruins of Iona in the Hebrides, a reflection that applies as well to reading. Indeed it is a theory of reading and I so adapt it. He said,

> Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings" (Boswell's JOURNAL...OF

THE HEBRIDES, LIFE, V, 334).

That is, in our daily lives we are mainly the passive prisoner of our senses, of what we see and hear and touch. We are engrossed in the NOW. Wordsworth had noted the same thing a few years later: how modern times conspired to gross and violent stimulation of the senses, blunting the discriminating powers of mind. Add to that today's instant technologies of TV and the computer, and we have reason to lament that we see (literally) but through a glass darkly. Think only what prisoners we are to two daily obsessions, "news" (or politics) and the media--more proof (if that were needed) of the truth of Eliot's observation, "Human kind can not bear very much reality."

The release from the prison of our senses is our active imagination and reflection. By imagination we enter into the lives of books and perforce reflect upon them. When we are imaginatively engaged in a text, a poem or play or story, we become a reflective part of that world. To cite Wallace Stevens,

> And out of what one sees and hears and out
> Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
> So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
> As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
> With the metaphysical changes that occur,
> Merely in living as and where we live.

Imaginative engagement in reading thus makes new selves and new worlds. But of course it's the writer's genius and art that engages us in the text, and texture, of the work. The

root of "text"--and its relatives "texture" and "context"--comes from the craft of weaving. "To weave" is to interlace or intertwine so as to form a fabric, a whole. Well written texts are woven words, the right words in the right order said Coleridge concisely, or in T.S. Eliot's metaphor they are a graceful dance,

> (where every word is at home,
> Taking its place to support the others,
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,
> The common word exact without vulgarity,
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,
> The complete consort dancing together)....
> (LITTLE GIDDING)

The crafted text takes us into new worlds, makes new selves of us, merely in living where and as we live, said Stevens. How is that so? Let's look at a text in its context, mindful of who wrote it and when and where, Wordworth's marvelous lyric of 1799:

> A slumber did my spirit seal:
> I had no human fears:
> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.
>
> No motion has she now, no force;
> She neither hears nor sees,
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
> With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Two stanzas, in the alternating rhyme and rhythm of common hymns and ballads, mainly one syllable common spoken words, "diurnal" the only unusual word in the lyric: simplicity itself, but what deceptive simplicity. For the speaker, "I", experiences a great revolution in consciousness about life and death. In a state of unawareness, his spirit sealed in

slumber (a powerful metaphor in sound and sense), he takes the "she" in his life for granted (whether lover, child, friend, is not the point), he is without "human fears" of her change or loss or death. She seemed "a thing", a natural part of things, beyond change.

But now she is lost, is a thing, and indeed has become a part of the natural order of rocks and stones and trees. Her daily vitality and motion in life have in death become part of the impersonal and universal planetary motion. Before, after--what seemed, what is--innocence, experience--time, eternity--an enlarged consciousness of life: a new awareness has humanized his soul. That is the experience suggested in this concise little poem. Truly much in little.

As for the context, its time and place, a biographer might want to know whether the poet actually lost some loved one in his life in 1799. He didn't, but he clearly could imagine it. A sensitive reader will see the aptness of the word "slumber" here as a sort of anaesthesia of the spirit, sealed off from reality. And to know something of Wordsworth's poetic inspiration by nature gives a particular awe to the image of "rocks, and stones, and trees" in cosmic and everlasting motion.

A fine poem by Wallace Stevens, on the act of reading, enacts the sense of the lines cited above of creating new selves and new worlds "Merely in living as and where we

live." It is "THE HOUSE WAS QUIET AND THE WORLD WAS CALM," a meditation on reading.

> The house was quiet and the world was calm.
> The reader became the book; and summer night
>
> Was like the conscious being of the book.
> The house was quiet and the world was calm.
>
> The words were spoken as if there was no book,
> Except that the reader leaned above the page,
>
> Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
> The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom
>
> The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
> The house was quiet because it had to be.
>
> The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
> The access of perfection to the page.
>
> And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
> In which there is no other meaning, itself
>
> Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
> Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

The first three lines state the whole poem in brief, what, where, how: a quiet house, a calm world, the reader became the book, and the summer night, reality itself, becomes a part of the reader's conscious being. Subject and object are fused. The remaining 13 lines elaborate this "perfection" of mind and page and place, the experience of the act of reading itself being no less than an enactment of truth. The poem moves from a particular reader--in the past tense, the house WAS, the reader BECAME--to the quality of such an experience itself, summarized in the enduring present tense, the poet ending the meditation brilliantly by the incantatory repetition of the pivotal word "itself,"

> The truth in a calm world,

In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

Such complete fusion of subject and object and place and time in the conscious act of reading is intensest reality and gives significance, satisfaction, and worth to our lives. The experience of pleasure is the pleasure itself. And surely that pleasure deepens when reading thus is an end in itself.

Poetry, to be sure, doesn't usually achieve that kind of intensity and sublimity, and there are as many forms of poetry as there are poets. When asked once what poetry was, Dr. Johnson replied, "Why, sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all KNOW what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is" (LIFE, iii, 38). Apparently an American rural poet thought that poetry rhymed and told the truth. This is his epitaph (maybe apocryphal) on a friend:

Here lies John Bun.
He was killed by a gun.
His name was not Bun,
but Wood.
But Wood would not rhyme with gun,
And Bun would.

Poor Wood, now Bun, all tangled up in those unintended puns on his name "Wood would not... And Bun would"). As an epitaph clearly it's less a memorial than an apology for poetry, but it's a memorable one. It's not usual for a poem --not an epitaph anyway--to be a critique upon itself.

I said that much reading in later life is re-reading, not only because of our experience with books but because we have selected a canon, of old reliables that have classic standing with us whether they do with anybody else or not. Then too we re-read to refresh, and in fact re-perceive, what has faded from the coals of our voluntary memory.

In re-reading thus the Henry Fourth plays, had we noticed before how Falstaff, a central figure in both, keeps toying with the bitter word "banish", i.e, to cast off, expel, exile--which, sadly, before long is to be his own hard fate? Or, had we reflected before on the ironies in BLEAK HOUSE, in the description of the little beggar boy, Jo, munching his scraps at Blackfriars Bridge, about to be moved along by the police, staring dumbly up at the great gold Cross on the summit of St. Paul's, innocent--and certainly not a beneficiary-- of all that fine preaching there on charity and children and the kingdom of God?

The great stories and poems keep appealing to the many selves we are imaginatively and reflectively capable of. In a poem titled THE READER in the NEW YORKER (Oct. 1, 2001) Richard Wilbur (the Amherst poet) writes beautifully of this. (Wilbur, by the way, told Ron Rosbottom, that the poem was in fact inspired by seeing his wife absorbed in her reading.) A woman is reading--rereading in fact what she had read long ago, medieval romances, Stendhal, Tolstoy--and she

already knows what dreadful thing will happen in the stories. Yet knowing that,

> it may be that at times,
> She sees their first and final selves at once,
> As a god might to whom all things is now.
> Or, having lived so much herself, perhaps
> She meets them this time with a wiser eye....
> But the true wonder of it is that she,
> For all she may know the consequences,
> Still turns enchanted to the next bright page
> Like some Natasha in the ballroom door--
> Caught in blind delight of being, ready still
> To enter life on life and see them through.

"Caught in blind delight of being", re-reading is that privileged experience of simply being, in entering life on life and seeing the consequences through. It's a poetic resaying of Stevens' wonder in "who could have thought to make/ So many selves, so many sensuous worlds...." Reading being thus a pleasure simply in itself, it advances us--to apply Dr. Johnson again--"in the dignity of thinking beings." The poets themselves called the experience of such a union or fusion of self and other, subject and object, intensest reality. For Wordsworth it was "spots of time," for Stevens moments of "perfection", for Eliot "the still point of the turning world". Whatever, for the reader such an engaged life is also a way of seeing into the life of things.

But a proviso from Marcel Proust, who was deeply interested in what reading was and what a masterpiece does for us; and I cite from a recent little book, HOW PROUST CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE, by Alain de Botton. It is a self-help

manual on reading, and a first-rate one. Yes, Proust said, we are engrossed by masterpieces and become their world. They change our habitual way of being and seeing. They captivate us.

But does that mean then we are enslaved by them, lose our own independence? By no means, Proust explains, for "there is no better way of coming to be aware of what one feels oneself than by trying to recreate in oneself what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our thought itself that we bring into the light, together with his" (p. 178). The masterwork may appear to have wholesale answers and "conclusions", but for the reader those are only "incitements". We must choose for ourselves. "That is the value of reading, and also its inadequacy" (p 180). Great creative works are art, not doctrine, possible truth, not the truth. One need not be Roman Catholic to appreciate THE DIVINE COMEDY nor Puritan to delight in PARADISE LOST.

Clearly that is taking reading seriously and (adapting Dr. Johnson again) "advances us in the dignity of thinking beings." Nowadays we hear a good bit about the decline, indeed disappearance of reading. Worst-case scenarios depict our students as able neither to read nor write, with the flight of Shakespeare from the ordinary curriculum and the Bible as foreign to students as the Koran. Our grand libraries are seen as empty and echoing as the old grand central railway stations. And public discourse is more name-

calling and shouting than rational argument. Such an intellectual wasteland of course is hyperbole, politics, satire, or so we trust.

But we do face a real problem ("challenge", we encourage each other) in our society of instanteous communication and information. The "click-HERE, click-NOW" syndrome doesn't automatically school us in reflective reading and discourse, or imagination, or creation, all of which have always been thought to be at the heart of a liberating education, one that frees us from the prison and the prejudices of our individual selves. These are won at a much higher price. Reading, solitary, reflective, and imaginative reading, is key to that. I close with a lyric by Emily Dickinson (#1593, c.1882). It's about the act of reading a good book as communion, a sacrament, the fellowship of spirit with spirit, hence transforming and liberating.

He ate and drank the precious Words--
His Spirit grew robust -
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust -

He danced along the dingy Days
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book -- What Liberty
A loosened spirit brings --

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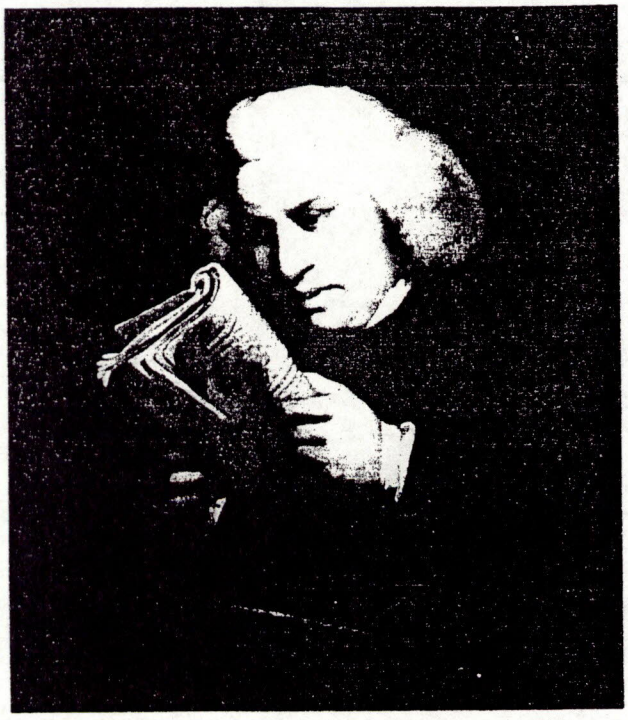
Some recent provocative books on reading:

Robert Alter, THE PLEASURES OF READING IN AN IDEOLOGICAL AGE (Norton, 1996)
Sven Birkerts, THE GUTENBERG ELEGIES: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age (Fawcett, 1994)
Sven Birkerts, READINGS (Graywolf, 1999)

Harold Bloom, HOW TO READ A BOOK AND WHY (2000)

Alain de Botton, HOW PROUST CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE (Vintage, 1998)

Denis Donoghue, THE PRACTICE OF READING (Yale, 1998)



Johnson in 1775, by Joshua Reynolds.

THE READER

She is going back, these days, to the great stories
That charmed her younger mind. A shaded light
Shines on the nape half-shadowed by her curls,
And a page turns now with a scuffing sound.
Onward they come again, the orphans reaching
For a first handhold in a stony world,
The young provincials who at last look down
On the city's maze, and will descend into it,
The serious girl, once more, who would live nobly,
The sly one who aspires to marry so,
The young man bent on glory, and that other
Who seeks a burden. Knowing as she does
What will become of them in bloody field
Or Tuscan garden, it may be that at times
She sees their first and final selves at once,
As a god might to whom all time is now.
Or, having lived so much herself, perhaps
She meets them this time with a wiser eye,
Noting that Julien's calculating head
Is from the first too severed from his heart.
But the true wonder of it is that she,
For all that she may know of consequences,
Still turns enchanted to the next bright page
Like some Natasha in the ballroom door—
Caught in the flow of things wherever bound,
The blind delight of being, ready still
To enter life on life and see them through.

—*Richard Wilbur*

"The New Yorker," Oct. 2001