

THE FATALITY OF READING

Writing appears as productive, activist, material; *reading* as passive, accumulative, retrograde—the most recalcitrant of bourgeois idealisms.

Geoffrey Hartman

I set this observation of an intensely admired critic, from whom I have learned (and purloined) so much, at the beginning of my text—my sermonical toad wears yet a precious jewel in his head—so as to keep what follows from sounding, as most discussions of reading tend to sound, like a more or less dignified whimper. *Nicht diese Töne*, as Schiller (in Beethoven's voice) prompts—it is a stricter resonance I would have you hear in my remarks: if not a joyful noise, at least a dutiful resolve.

In any life of literary aspiration during the last fifty years—that is, since the universal and undisputed prevalence of television, which is probably the principal if not the determinant factor in the situation I am about to discuss—one is compelled to take out a sort of anecdotal membership in an uneasy chorus: teachers of literature, particularly in that part of the academy which is concerned with the training of writers, variously remark and identically lament what they commonly designate as “the decline and fall of reading.” To abound in their sense is, in the present exacerbated state of affairs, a languid business quite without the Gibbonian vigor, and if I am, like my colleagues, doomed to entertain the grimmest of lectorial

The Hopwood Lecture, delivered at the Hopwood Awards ceremony at the University of Michigan, April 15, 2003

prospects, I hope to make manifest that I do so not merely in order to deplore the view.

Certainly my epigraph's characterization of writing and of reading applies, with an almost pythonical stringency, to my *students'* account of the situation. For over twenty years, in Boston and New Haven, in Cincinnati and Los Angeles, most recently in Houston and now in New York, I have been concerned to profess, that is, to analyze and discuss, literary texts with young writers who seek what they generally regard as advanced training in the arts of literature with a view to professional practice. These young writers have been, in my case, chiefly poets, but my lecture classes, which range over all manner of literary works, have included any number of fictioneers, and a fair sprinkling of memoirists (fancy, the retrospective gaze or glare at twenty-five!); and all these students endorse and indeed sanction Hartman's proposition that writing is indeed their thing, but that reading—reading is no thing at all, merely an insignificant peninsula on the topography of their imputed intentions.

Inevitably I must compare and contrast, as the academy is so fond of doing, this response of theirs (which I am honor bound to identify as indeed the truth of their paradoxical situation) with the conduct of my own circle (or whatever irregular polygon we moved in) some fifty years back. Inspecting that contrast, I find that we differed—John Hollander, Tony Hecht, Louis Simpson, and Robert Gottlieb, Meg Greenfield, Anne Loesser (who was to become Mrs. Hollander), and Marion Magid (I list only eight literary lions and lionesses at my own menagerie, I mean university)—differed from the (for all I know) equally gifted students of the generation I am holding up to . . . identification—we differed by one salient feature in all conscience: back then (*ab illo tempore* as the epic writers have it), we were, whenever our professors and our admired literary prototypes (Mark van Doren, Lionel Trilling, Fred Dupee, Moses Hadas, Quentin Anderson—the professors were often the same persons as the admired prototypes, which I understand is not, nowadays, so frequent an occurrence)—whenever our *authorities* happened to cite, and to praise, an author, a book, a literary phenomenon of any kind which was unknown to us, we were ashamed of our ignorance of it. And the proper antidote to our shame, it was universally acknowl-

edged, was to precipitate ourselves to the library (this was before the paperback revolution, and most bookstores exceeded our financial resources) in order to seize upon the work, the author, the literary phenomenon in question, and *read it*.

This remedial procedure is no longer undertaken by students who are unfamiliar with the dropped name, for indeed no remedy need be sought when no malady is acknowledged, and I perceive that the shame which generated such actions among my set is no longer an affect known to my students—all of whom are setting out to become writers themselves, but none of whom is particularly interested in following up the references, the suggestions, the *clues* to be discovered in BOOKS.

Yet they are intent upon becoming authors, these young men and women, eager to absorb whatever hints might further their success—so that I suspect their intentions have different grounds from those which impelled my coevals into the library on such flagrant notice fifty years ago. It has become clear to me that the reading of books has very little to do with contemporary literary ambitions, and even with that trifling interest in books which are not specifically read. Ever present to my mind is the young novelist in the front row of a large lecture class in Los Angeles who looked quite blank when I began one of my reverential accolades of *Madame Bovary*; “You know,” I said, advancing menacingly upon her, “the novel by Flaubert—you may well have read it.” “Not personally,” she gulped.

I do not mean to suggest that the new writers are hostile to reading, or even to books (though I believe they are hostile to libraries); when they are faced, for instance, with my exotic allusions or my draconian assignments, there is no stir of opposition registered, there is merely indifference, merely a sort of patient skepticism, merely what Wordsworth, in another connection, denominated a *wise passiveness*. It is my sense that the students in our writing programs see no special reason to read (even, or particularly, if they intend to write). “Why should I? What for?” is the governing question, answered, of course, by the depressing expedient, “to pass the course.” In fact, the precise quality of our writing students’ relation to books has been crystallized by the President of the United States, no great reader himself, when in a slightly dif-

ferent (but analogous) connection, he used the infamous, the paralyzing word *IRRELEVANT*. There it is—for the first time since the Renaissance, by the very human beings who mean to write books themselves, the ulterior existence of books is deemed irrelevant.

I should enter an illustrative caveat here, or else enter a monastery—for it is not really the case that *all* books are subject to the indifference of the new writing clan. There is a particular kind of book which is found to be particularly rebarbative, and for this kind is reserved the actual insurrection which occasionally occurs when an unwary teacher assigns such works to be read. Not to put too fine a point on it, this kind of book is, invariably, *a long book*, and for this length, concentration, attention, focus, *heed* cannot be mustered. Here indeed may be the legacy of television, the convention of a monkey's span of attention rather than any particular addiction to what appears on the tiny screen; but it is certainly the case that a *volume* (by which I mean a voluminous work) is out of the question for class consideration; we haven't time, the students say, and the time they do have is disposed elsewhere.

I suspect you are quite as familiar with these matters as I am, but in my role as Ancient Mariner, I am compelled to reiterate the circumstance. I bring you a report from those fields—playing fields, killing fields: the risk of your choice is mine—with the same bereft assiduity that Stéphane Mallarmé brought to that comparably distinguished Oxford audience of his, when he announced that he had drastic news to communicate. *On a touché au vers!* Mallarmé was heard to exclaim: “They have tampered with verse!” Of course the wizard of the Rue de Rome believed, good Platonist that he was, that each time the modes of music alter, the walls of the City tremble, and he divined, with some dread and some accuracy, that the introduction of *vers libre* (almost the same thing as *free verse*) into the traditional armory of French prosody—he himself being one of the introducers, one of the offenders—was an epochal and alarming event.

Well, in my corrupt and cynical way, I am something of a Platonist too, and I believe, at least, that the verse, the poetry, the literature we shall have is the verse, the poetry, the literature we deserve, the literature we literally bargained

for. The shelves of the Library of Congress will not buckle under the weight of our heterodox prosodic practice, as Mallarmé might have feared, but the works that load them will just as effectively block out the light.

And it is an analogous announcement that I make on a slightly larger scale (though to Mallarmé, of course, there would have been no discrepancy in scale between a corruption, a dilution of prosodic conventions and the explicitly declared irrelevance of books to our new writers, for whom those darkening shelves are no more than so much incunabula). For me the moment of truth, the parallel to Mallarmé's horrific discovery, came when I was asked, last winter, by the director of The Modern Library, to write an introduction to a new packaging of the twice-revised Scott-Moncrieff translation of Marcel Proust's seven-part novel *In Search of Lost Time*, a veritable icon of the voluminous, wouldn't you say? With the discretion and perhaps the modesty which is so marked a feature of my character, I implored David Ebershoff, for whom I had already translated *The Charterhouse of Parma* and who had confidently commissioned me to translate, as if it might be a parallel success, Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*—I pleaded with this notably forbearing executive (he is a young novelist himself) to let this cup pass from me. "No, Richard, you must do this for us—there is a whole new generation of readers of Proust out there who will need. . . ." And at the mention of "need", David's voice faded from my ears, his words blurred into that terrible roar which George Eliot tells us is to be heard on the other side of silence, for it was just then I realized, I *knew* that there would never be "a whole new generation of readers" of Proust, or of Tolstoy, of Gibbon or of Montaigne, of Thomas Mann or of Samuel Richardson. New readers, at least the readers who were going to be new writers, would never read through these excruciatingly voluminous works, or the similarly extensive works of writers "like" them. I knew this with the same irrefutable certitude with which I know that if, in this very decade, there have been more new translations of Dante and Homer than in the entire preceding century, Dante and Homer are thus innumerable translated because they are not being read.

And of course it was upon the irrefutable certitude of my realization that there would never be a whole new generation of

Proust readers that I immediately agreed to "introduce Proust," as the new Modern Library edition required.

For as I promised, or threatened to reveal, I have a scheme whereby I am inspired to persist in the teaching of literature, even the literature of voluminous authors, and even to entire classes of those incipient writers for whom reading is a lost cause, a forlorn hope, and an unregenerate exercise in tedium. (The fear of being bored, by the way, is the great professional distortion of those incipient writers in my classes, another version of our national disease, allergy to the past). The very assurance with which Proust insists that the past is *within the present* is likely to seem quite repellent, even offensive to these young men and women who are so so ready, with regard to literature, to take it or let it alone.

Of course I know Proust intends to be gentle with his readers—his ferocity is elsewhere—but I am all too aware of the reception he is likely to meet with as the sentences run on, some of the longest in the history of literature, and the pages mount up, and the *volumes* slow down. Wherefore my pedagogic scheme, the discovery that there are certain authors—Proust perhaps chief among the very ones looming or lowering in my list as monsters of the voluminous—who have devised a technique for securing the attention of readers, for stiffening the flagging patience of a whole new generation of readers whose existence they could not have imagined. Proust first among them—though I think that Proust probably realized that there would be future readers who were not built for his *longueurs*, or at least for his length. On any one page or in any one passage—somewhere between a chant and a chapter—Proust manages to cast his spell, to sound his note, *to tell his truth*, for God's sake! so that this virtually unimaginable reader doesn't *have to* read to the end of the volume, of the seventh volume, to get what Proust is up to. This author has seen to it that the message is sent on every page, providing (or permitting) a way of reading which takes our new reader's impatience into consideration, which sums up *as the reader goes along*. Such a reader can read, can desist, and then, another time, resume. Indeed, I propose a new title by which this voluminous novel by the first of our post-modern authors who died in 1922 may be known to his American non-readers: *In Search of Another Time*.

There are other books that perform an analogous function. We call them "wisdom literature," their matter is casually crystallized quite as often as it is likely to be exhaustively secreted (Montaigne, Emerson, Nietzsche) and unlike the epic novelists I have named, they are more likely to find a purchase on the minds—on the *attention* of the readers I speak of, who have so disposed of *reading matter* that they cannot get through *War and Peace* or *Clarissa* or *The Golden Bowl*.

Of course I believe there is a real advantage in building up sufficient momentum to read straight through from "Time was, I went to bed early . . ." to (seven volumes and four thousand pages on) ". . . a place prolonged past measure in the dimension of time." There are still readers like me who delight in the entirety of *The Tale of Genji*, though something valuable of its whole extent can be gleaned or glimpsed from a haiku-sounding made anywhere. Lady Murasaki is not generally considered pithy, yet there are moments—epigrams and aphorisms—when she is as succinct as any of those classic French moralists politely murmuring somewhere up ahead of her. Why, sometimes she is faster than La Rochefoucauld himself, as when she celebrates the secret pleasure of maintaining a scab somewhere on her body by constantly picking it off so it can form over and over again.

Certainly this is not the approved method of reading the greatest woman writer between the author of the *Book of J* and Virginia Woolf, but it may have to do. For our new writers at the tail-end of the banquet that is literature, articulated expression may come to be doubted, for where there is so much print, the threshold at which readers are strongly affected is raised to so high a point that almost all communication falls below it. As the great critic with whom I opened my remarks has observed: "The desire to know remains, but what is known is no longer desired, and becomes indifferent."

Perhaps, despite my patching and plastering expedients, the very notion of reading is in jeopardy. Perhaps reading and writing, as we see in the behavior of our incipient authors, are drifting apart. Perhaps what our students really want is a moment when writing will be as nearly automatic as reading a newspaper is now. A moment when writing and reading would no longer be mutually reinforcing, mutually dependent. These young men and woman who read merely to find a

sparkplug for their own performance are already close to that "productive" state when, as Max Frisch has observed, "technology can so arrange the world that we don't have to experience it."

But I am veering into dangerous regions where whimpering is all too likely. I want to recur to some way of keeping the fate of reading, however partial, however parceled out, alive in our curriculum, even for the new writers who find the full-scale project tiresome and untenable. We have not yet gone all the way, and though grave, the situation has not yet passed beyond the possibilities of a sort of recovery. I am here not only in my Cassandra or my Jeremiah costume, but with my robes of dawn about me too. You can discern them if you attend. I am here to urge, while there is still time enough and world, the restoration of reading, that practice, once the renewal and the consolation of humanity, to something like its ulterior status. Of course part of our relation to reading is now a study of the escapes from it. Our incomparable modernity has been achieved by certain new writers struggling to release themselves from precisely the order of reversion so that they might gain access to what they perceive as the order of advance. They constitute a generation which knows not the Law. And though the results of such ignorance are often brilliant, and certainly worth our critical attention, our pedagogical collaboration even, they are desperate measures, dreadful freedoms which only the strongest and most resolute talents can endure. Of course that is what such a culture as ours may want, only the strongest and most resolute talents. But I believe that such talents are more likely to be found by a recovery of reading, that practice so frequently jettisoned by our Writing Programs, those academies of freedom functioning across our country at a Stakhanovite level, if level is the word I want.

Indeed, as my privileged knowledge of poetry informs me, and as the best critics of poetry all tell us in the brilliant and exasperated terms to which Ms. Vendler and Mr. Bloom have been reduced (or enlarged?) by our determined mugwumpery, the frequentation of the poets of the past is remarkable for the unity, the consistency of its demonstration: there has never been a poet, a strong poet, who has not been found out in reading all the other strong poets—not Walt Whitman, not

Emily Dickinson, not Arthur Rimbaud are exceptions to this program of concern. All the greatest rebels and secessionists and singletons have been *imminent* participants in the one lectorial enterprise. The only real and sufficient education of the poet has been reading poetry, as the only real and sufficient education of the writer is the reading of books. It is quite possible, as I have ill-naturedly remarked, that writing and reading will part company; but if that happens, *when* that happens, only what is already written and can be read will survive. Without reading, writing will perish from the earth. This is because we do not write for ourselves, we do not write for each other—we write to join the great dead. Each writer, Emerson once observed, is merely a new crater of an old volcano.