

The Reader

“I live with books more than with people. Which is to say that I can easily do without people (there are days when I could easily do without myself), and that in the country of books where I dwell, the dead can count entirely as much as the living.”

Adrienne Monnier

I’ve been doing a good deal of reading lately. In the early morning when it is still very dark, I resume reading whatever novel or short story I had put down the night before. I get back to it if I am lucky enough to have an afternoon nap and then once again at night before I fall asleep. I also read serious non-fiction literature, especially the literature, if you can call it that, of the social sciences, such as the books and journal articles that deal with the research I am doing

But it is literary fiction that occupies the major portion of my reading time now. Literature has come to me rather late in life and I’m striving diligently to catch up. On average, I estimate that I spend about two and a half hours a day reading fiction. It is difficult to know how that compares with other readers of fiction. The recent National Endowment of the Arts report¹ on literary reading in this country is silent about the *time* spent reading. Instead, variations in the book reading habits of the adults sampled were measured in terms of *frequency* of books (literary and non-literary) read per year.

Four categories of readers were distinguished on the basis of books read per/year: light readers (1-5), moderate readers (6-11), frequent readers (12-49), and avid readers (50 or more). On that measure, I would most likely be considered a Frequent Reader. I am also a slow reader. In 2003, the year after the one reported in NEA Survey, I read 45 books,

¹ Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America. National Endowment of the Arts. Research Division Report #46. 2004

not quite enough to be considered an Avid Reader, at least in terms of completed *books*, not total time spent reading.²

With all the reading I've been doing lately, I have been led to wonder how and to what extent this kind of experience has influenced my life. How have my beliefs or values been changed by books I have read? Do I behave any differently than I would, had I not been a frequent reader of literary fiction? And why does literary fiction have such a powerful hold on me?

It is said that questions like these impossible to answer, that the effects of literature are too subtle to be measured and difficult to isolate from the many other factors that shape a person's life. Perhaps. But more likely, I think we haven't really looked at these questions as carefully as we might. The difficulty of capturing the effects of reading literature, let alone the process by which this occurs does not mean it can't be done. Rather it suggests that we need to pursue these questions with greater ingenuity and more systematically than we have in the past and look to other ways to examine the potent effects of the reading experience other than comparing groups of readers and non-readers.

I have come to believe that the major barrier to a deeper understanding of this issue is one of measurement, namely, how to identify the complex and subtle ways reading literature influences particular individuals. Following a long tradition of "self-study" in psychology and psychoanalysis, I am going to start this inquiry by looking as closely as I can at my own reading experience. How has reading literature affected *me* and to what extent has it made a difference in my life?

It is said that the right book at the right time can give rise to a lifelong reading habit. I have always wondered if Alexander Dumas' *Camille* was that book for me. I think I was about 14 or 15 when I read the novel. As I recall the situation, the 1937 movie with Greta Garbo as *Camille* had been reissued and for reasons that completely baffle me now, I

² A complete measure would take into account time spent reading periodicals, newspapers, and material on the Web which taken together would be fairly substantial in my case.

decided that I wanted to see it. I am fairly certain my mother suggested I should read the book first and that she had purchased a copy for me.

And so, after breakfast early one weekend morning, I went back to bed to begin reading the novel. Going back to bed after breakfast was not something I ever did. That day was *the* exception and other than when I have been ill, I've never done it again. Reading *Camille* during the day in bed seemed like such a lark. Everything seemed to fall into place then on what was no doubt a sunny Saturday in Los Angeles sometime during the early fifties.

I returned to the book after lunch and continued reading until I had finished by mid-afternoon, in plenty of time to see the film that evening. It was showing at a nearby art house and I know that I went alone. Now, more than fifty years later, tales of ill-fated romances and their screen adaptations continue to exert a powerful hold on me. What draws me to these literary works, as well as many so other forms of literary fiction?

There are times like that when a book nearly takes command of my life, when my day is measured only by the time remaining before I can get back to it. There is nothing remarkable about this; every dedicated reader feels the same. It is why reading is such an imperative, one that continues to delight and amuse me throughout each year. Not long ago I went out of town for a few days to work on a project that was as remotely associated with literature as Newtonian physics. I was half-way through Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and couldn't wait to get back to it.

The book brought alive the meaning of literature for those who could only read and discuss it in hiding. Within an hour after returning, I took up the book once again. A feeling of relief swept over me, an emotion I often feel in getting back to fiction. I am not sure what gives rise to this feeling. But I know it is never one I experience in reading books about social research, even an excellent one. Perhaps it is unfair to expect they would have that kind of effect. All I know is that when I am reading works of literary fiction I have this sense of being in a place that is both comforting and congenial.

In the beginning of my adult reading years, I know it was literature's other-worldliness that drew me to it. It was a world so very different than the world of perception, learning, and social influence that occupied my working day. The writing was fresh and often brilliant. It was alive. Literature puts me in a frame of mind and mood that I don't want to leave, and where I feel I belong.

The colors are brighter, the rhythms are more surprising, the dialogue is richer. It is better than life itself.

The people are also so much more amusing and thoughtful than those I usually encounter. It never seems to matter that they live on the page. In fact, I soon come to realize I prefer it that way. Who would want to trade knowing a demolitions expert fighting the fascists in the mountains of Spain for a classical conditioning theorist in the basement of Eliot Hall? In these books I find individuals who I never seem to come across in my ordinary life, people who I would like to know and talk to with a while. It is a treat to know them. They are always there, ready to take up where we last left off, full of sparkling wit and thoughtful commentary. They don't shout or insult me with a nasty word or a sly inuendo. And from time to time they say something that surprises me, sets me back for a moment of reflection or confirms some belief I have. Here are people who, unlike those who occupy the world I live in, share some crazy idea I have or consider an issue the same way I do. That is very reassuring. At least I haven't gone off the deep end entirely.

But there is also another reason I'd rather be reading literature, one that in the final analysis is far more important. Literature seems to get me closer to the truth of things, to the truth about other people and above all to the truth about myself more than anything else I encounter. In a way, literature has given me some degree of clarity about who I am, more exactly clarity about the several selves I have become. The discovery of these truths is the heart of my reading experience and I wouldn't continue reading literature if I didn't come across one every once in a while.

Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, a novel that engrossed me for days, contains a great many passages of this kind. In *Saturday* McEwan charts one day in the life of a reflective, London neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne. Henry rises very early one Saturday morning and from his townhouse window sees a plane off in the distance falling in flames toward Heathrow. The mood is set, Perowne ponders the plane, his restlessness, his lovely wife, and the events he has planned for the day ahead, the mystery of flaming plane--a metaphor of our times. I didn't want the book to end. For a while I became Perowne and lived his day as if it was my own.

I marked forty-five separate passages in this intellectually rich novel about a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, a British neurosurgeon. Throughout this tale, Perowne muses about his discipline, his family, the routine chores that occupy his day, and the troublesome times in which he lives during the early years of the 21st century. In turn, I was led to reflect on those same topics as I paused to place my marks in the margin and then to ponder his musings and the extent to which I agreed with them or not. As a result, although it was not a very lengthy novel, it took me quite a while to read—a pleasure devoutly treasured by this reader.

To be sure, I never know when I will chance upon such a truth or what writers and in what books they have written they will appear. Their discovery is unpredictable, unexpected, surprising. The experience is compelling. It happens this way: I am reading along, then suddenly come across a passage in the text, or a sentence or two that causes me to stop. I read it over again. I mull it over. If it is in some way notable, I mark its place in the margin and make note of the page number in the back of the book. When I finish reading the book, I record each marked passage in a Word document of ever-increasing length. At the end of the year I add the cumulative set of passages to a volume I have been keeping over the years.

Recently, I spent some time trying to figure out what leads me to make note of certain passages and not others. In doing so, I thought I would gain some understanding of the concept of literary truth, as well as the reasons why I have succumbed to the literary experience. Of course, some of these passages are simply written so beautifully that they are hard to ignore, while others may be so witty or funny that I wanted to make note of them. But the majority convey an important truth that I wanted to record in order to mull over again at some later date.

I have no doubt that I have learned a very great deal from the books I have read. That includes a good deal of factual information, knowledge of other individuals and groups, styles of living and above all a better understanding of myself. But I don't read literature to learn in the same way I read a chemistry textbook to master the periodic table. Rather what I have learned is a rather disorganized store of information acquired as a result of an informal learning process rather than anything quite deliberate.

I also think that what I have learned from literature has varied as a function of my age. I didn't know anything about hypocrisy or the ubiquity of "phoniness" when I read *The Catcher in the Rye* as an adolescent. Afterwards I saw it everywhere. I still do. And I knew nothing about alienation or the sense of absurd until I read *The Stranger* not long after. While these concepts and others like them do not dominate my thinking, they do remain quietly in the background in my view of things.

When I am reading fiction I spend a fair amount of time considering the matters it sets before me. I suppose that literature is no different in this respect than any other learning experience. But somehow it seems more intimate, more personal, more likely to encourage an interior dialogue on matters of substance. I stop to reflect on the ideas that I draw from the page. The experience is not unlike the one Jonathan Franzen described in reading Alice Munro. "*Reading Munro puts me in that state of quiet reflection in which I think about my own life: about the decisions I've made, the things I've done and haven't done, the kind of person I am, the prospect of death.*"

The more often this occurs, the more I like the book. Sometimes these musings clarify uncertainties I have or suggest other ways to view the matter. At other times, they simply confirm beliefs I hold. It is always good to know they make some sense and that others share them, even if they live in another world.

I have also learned from my recent introduction to literature how little of it I know and how much catching up I have to do. I try to read across a broader range than I did 25 years ago. Then it was largely the *New Yorker*, if I was lucky. Now it extends to modern novels, and short stories, some poetry, a few theatrical productions, the classics--a little Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Proust--and the moderns--Coetzee, McEwan and Roth. When I find an author whose work I like, I am more likely than not to begin collecting his or her other works. A favorable review and the author's books are in my "cart;" an enticing ad and the collection grows, reference to a "must read" or an "influential forerunner" still more is added to the order, until eventually it is time to ship it out.

Reading good literature has also encouraged me to write, at least to try. I read terrific pieces of writing and I wonder if I could write like that? Of course I can't, but reading those who do it ever so much better makes it seem all the more worthwhile. And so I try this; I try that; I make errors; I get a little better. There is nothing like the experience. The act of reading literature encourages me to keep trying. Surely that is one of its strongest influences upon me.

The emotional and intellectual sensibilities that I have acquired from my reading experiences are difficult to identify with any degree of certainty. Here again I may be wrong to assume such effects, but it is hard not to attribute them to the cumulative impact of my reading experiences. The problem is how to describe such an elusive notion as sensibility in a way it can be measured and to isolate the influence of literature from the several other factors that surely play a role in its development.

You can see examples in individuals who have a way with words and are extremely well read. In my view, Susan Sontag was one such person. So is Harold Bloom. And it is clearly absent in other individuals who display none of their literary sophistication. But what is it that they have that I don't? They have surely read more widely, written about it more extensively, talked to students and literary scholars far more than I. They have spent a lifetime doing these things and above all they are quite simply just smarter than I am.

Although many people claim they have read a book that has changed their life, I can't think of a single one that has had such an effect on me. I do know reading a collection of great books in my Freshman Western Civilization course did fix the direction of my life. After that, there was no turning back from the life of learning and research. This is a path that I have taken at the expense of many others. Each step along that path strengthened whatever effects a reading life had for me. The cumulative impact of those experiences, week after week, year after year must be enormous. It is especially so in comparison to the experiences I might have had if I had not been reading. Instead, I read, ponder, take notes, do some research, and ruminate.

So rather than directly shape specific beliefs or values that I may hold, I think literature has exerted its influence in a much more general way. Indeed, my notions of love, justice, morality and beauty, for example, are hard to pin down. They tend to be much more fluid and tend to shift around a bit depending my experiences and the situation in which I find myself. Thus, the readings that I have done have taught me to be more critical, to become more aware of different ideas, cultures and ways to live.

It is in these various ways that I have been drawn to literature. I see people who are much like I am. Their companionship is revealing and consoling both. I see them more clearly than those I encounter in my daily life who I see only on the surface. No wonder it has taken me this long to discover truths about myself,

truths that are no doubt uniquely true for me for my history is never the same as anyone else's.

Why do we read? In her recent book, *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading*, Maureen Corrigan responds that we read "...to set off on a search for authenticity. We want to get closer to the heart of things and sometimes even a few good sentences...can crystallize value feelings, fleeting physical sensations, or sometimes, profound epiphanies." Harold Bloom in *How to Read and Why* concurs. "Ultimately we read—as Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson agree—in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests." Yes, we don't have an easy time knowing ourselves. Sometimes a good book makes our task a little easier, to say nothing of the multiple pleasures it provides.

We read ourselves into literature without concern, as we are in science, for whether or not it is true for others, and if so, for how many and to what degree. Instead, the truth of any literary expression is immediately true for the reader because it corresponds to his or her experience or provides a language for it in a way that had not been available before. "Yes," we say, "that is true for me, true to my own experience. This is my story. That's exactly the way I felt. Or I had not realized its truth until I saw it on the page. That is what a good book is all about. At their best they bring insight, understanding, wonder, pleasure and yes, friendship. The encounter becomes a process of coming to a deeper understanding of yourself and those larger truths of reality that are often difficult to grasp in any other way. In the final analysis, then, that is the great appeal of literature for me, the reasons I am so strongly drawn to it now.

What is the value of this personal account? Does it any meaning for someone other than myself? Essentially I am asking about the generality of my experience? Are other readers drawn to literature for similar reasons? Could my experience be useful in promoting reading among the increasing number of non-readers? All too many bemoan the decline of reading in this country, but all too few of these commentators having any suggestions for overcoming this decline. Perhaps my experience has some relevance in confronting this problem. I realize it is presumptuous of me to say this. But who does

not wish to come to a deeper understanding of themselves or to see themselves depicted on the page? Who can turn away from a character who thinks and feels the same way as you or who helps you to clarify your thinking or spark your hope? This has been my experience in reading literature and I suspect it often is and can be the experience of many others, as well.