

Denis Donoghue

The Practice of Reading



DENIS DONOGHUE

The Practice of
Reading-ing

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW HAVEN & LONDON

Published with assistance from the Kingsley Trust Association Publication Fund established by the Scroll and Key Society of Yale College.

Copyright © 1998 by Denis Donoghue. All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Designed by Nancy Ovedovitz and set in Minion type by Keystone Typesetting, Inc. Printed in the United States of America by Thomson-Shore, Dexter, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Donoghue, Denis.

The practice of reading / Denis Donoghue.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-300-07466-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-300-08264-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. English literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. Reader-response criticism. 3. Books and reading. I. Title.

PR21.D66 1998

820.9—dc21 97-42549

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Acknowledgments

I did much of the reading for this book while I was a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, in Washington D.C., and, later, while I was a senior Mellon fellow at the National Humanities Center, in North Carolina. I am grateful to the staff of these centers for their help and to the fellows in both places with whom I had lively discussions.

I have tried to indicate, in each chapter, the context of the debate—so far as I have access to it—and the critical occasions that I have found most instructive. I wish to acknowledge the scholars and critics who have pointed the debate. The kind of reading that I advocate is best done in such a context of agreement, dissent, and clarification.

In rereading this book, I have come upon pages in which my debts to particular friends and colleagues are especially clear. So I thank Stephen Bann, Ralph Cohen, John Coleman, Geoffrey Hill, Lisa Jardine, Richard Lehan, Melissa Malouf, and Eugene Vance. The customary exemption is appropriate: none of these friends and colleagues is to be blamed for my errors.

Some chapters or parts of chapters appeared earlier in

the *Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Review of Books*, *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, *New Literary History*, and *Comparative Criticism*. A shorter version of Chapter 3 appears in Alvin Kernan, editor, *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton University Press, 1996). I am grateful to the publisher for permission to reprint that material. Chapter 8 was given as the Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture at the University of London on December 6, 1993, and published by that university.

Reading is the easiest thing in the world, it is freedom
without work, a pure Yes blossoming in the immediate.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*

It is the peculiar business of poetry and the other arts to
qualify with form and order so much of experience as can
be made intelligible.

—R. P. Blackmur, *Outsider at the Heart of Things*

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Part I

ONE

Curriculum Vitae 3

TWO

Theory, Theories, and Principles 20

THREE

Three Ways of Reading 34

FOUR

The Practice of Reading 54

FIVE

What Is Interpretation? 80

SIX

Doing Things with Words 98

SEVEN

Orality, Literacy, and Their Discontents 109

EIGHT

Murray Krieger Versus Paul de Man 124

Part II

NINE

What Happens in *Othello* 143

TEN

Reading *Gulliver's Travels* 165

ELEVEN

On a Word in Wordsworth 187

TWELVE

The Antinomian Pater 205

THIRTEEN

On a Chapter of *Ulysses* 222

FOURTEEN

Yeats: The New Political Issue 236

FIFTEEN

Teaching *Blood Meridian* 258

Notes 279

Index 297

Part I

O N E

Curriculum Vitae

The first book of criticism that I recall reading, pencil in hand and taking notes, was T. S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*. Many of its sentences have lodged with me for so long that I have stopped thinking of them as quotations; I recite them as if they were my own. "When we are considering poetry, we must consider it primarily as poetry and not as another thing." "Poetry is not the inculcation of morals or the direction of politics; and no more is it religion or an equivalent of religion, except by some monstrous abuse of words." "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."¹ These sentences are as close to me as lines from "The Waste Land": "In the mountains, there you feel free." "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." But what I found most edifying in *The Sacred Wood* was Eliot's concern for language, his sense of the relation between the quality of language and the quality of the feeling it inhabited, his conviction that a particular language was an indication of the quality of the society in which it was spoken. I admired, too, in Eliot's later critical writings, his responsiveness to differences of tone and style; as in "Poetry and Drama," where he comments on the first scene

of *Hamlet* and notes the anticipation of the plot in Horatio's word "usurp'st" when he addresses the Ghost—"What art thou that usurp'st this time of night?" Eliot quotes the great speech by Horatio with which the scene ends:

But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.
Break we our watch up. . .

—and comments:

This is great poetry, and it is dramatic; but besides being poetic and dramatic, it is something more. There emerges, when we analyse it, a kind of musical design also which reinforces and is one with the dramatic movement. It has checked and accelerated the pulse of our emotion without our knowing it. Note that in these last words of Marcellus—

It faded on the crowing of the cock.

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes

Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,

The bird of dawning singeth all night long,

—there is a deliberate brief emergence of the poetic into consciousness.

When we hear the lines

But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,

Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.

we are lifted for a moment beyond character, but with no sense of unfitness of the words coming, and at this moment, from the lips of Horatio. The transitions in the scene obey laws of the music of dramatic poetry.²

During those years I was a student at University College, Dublin, and at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, having recently arrived from Warrenpoint, a small town in Northern Ireland where my father was the local police sergeant. For financial and other reasons, we were not a bookish family. I had access to a few shelves of books in the home of my local elementary teacher, Sean Crawford, but the range of reading matter was small. At UCD I read for a B.A. in Latin and English; at the academy—where my tuition for the first year was paid by a well-wishing donor, Alan Boydell, cousin of my music teacher, Brian Boydell—I studied harmony, counterpoint, and lieder. I worked as hard trying to sing Schumann's *Dichterliebe* as I did coping with Shakespeare's plays and poems. I don't recall feeling the need of a theory to get me started in reading

literature or listening to music. In those days one learned a few rudimentary skills by practice or, as in my case, by apprenticing oneself to a master or several masters. If I gave any thought to theory, I'm sure I wanted a theory of the arts to be equally responsive to literature and music. It meant a good deal to me to know that Kenneth Burke's earliest essays were on music, that Eliot's Quartets were written in some relation to the last quartets of Beethoven, and that Theodor Adorno, the author of *Negative Dialectics*, also wrote *The Philosophy of Modern Music*. I read this latter book in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, without quite understanding why Stravinsky came out so badly from a comparison with Schoenberg. I didn't read *Negative Dialectics* till much later.

Meanwhile, I was trying to break into print, starting with book reviews for the *Irish Independent*, little essays on music for a weekly magazine, the *Leader*, and later, music criticism for the *Irish Times*. The Irish Jesuit quarterly, *Studies*, published some of my essays and reviews. But I wanted a larger context. It was my ambition to publish literary essays in the American quarterlies, so I kept up with the *Sewanee Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, and the *Hudson Review* even more assiduously than with their English counterparts, *Scrutiny* and *Essays in Criticism*. I read every new essay I could find by Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, William Empson, Yvor Winters, Lionel Trilling, Robert Penn Warren, Kenneth Burke, R. P. Blackmur, and Francis Fergusson. It was a glorious day for me when Ransom, in a handwritten letter, accepted my essay on Yeats's "Words for Music Perhaps" for the *Kenyon Review*. A few months later an essay of mine on Joyce appeared, my first name misspelled, in the *Sewanee Review*. Soon I was trying to write sentences of my own, not entirely purloined from those of Eliot, Burke, and Blackmur.

We may as well continue to call these writers the New Critics, though none of them liked the label and Trilling and Fergusson went their different ways. I admired the New Critics first because they were good writers. Some of them were poets or novelists first and critics only betimes. Each had his particular style, instances of which I transcribed on request forms in the National Library of Ireland. I was also impressed by the fact that these writers so evidently and powerfully read the literature they wrote about. At least to begin with, each of them submitted his mind to the book he was reading. He might assert himself later and keep his distance. When Eliot compared a few lines of Philip Massinger with their putative origin in Shakespeare, his judgment came with

the authority of immense reading and the providential method of criticism he recommended, that of being highly intelligent. To compare Burke's essay on Marianne Moore with Blackmur's on the same subject was to be struck by the possible variety of literary criticism and the scale of the merit entailed. Blackmur spoke of criticism as bringing the work of art to the condition of performance. That was what these critics were doing. They didn't avoid generalizing, but their general statements always issued from a sufficient phalanx of particulars, local perceptions in the act of reading. Blackmur especially took care not to let his mind capitulate to a formula, a pattern set in advance of need. In "A Critic's Job of Work," he said that poetry is life at the remove of form and meaning: "not life lived but life framed and identified." But he was alive to the difference between a form and a formula—which he sometimes called a doctrine or a code. Thinking of Henry James, he argued that William Dean Howells and Edith Wharton sank by comparison "because their moral codes very often prohibited feeling, made whole classes of feeling impossible."³ Like Brooks and Tate, Blackmur acted upon Eliot's distinction between writers who think and feel in turns and writers who "feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."⁴ Thought, Blackmur said, "defines relationships as formulae and makes a shorthand, a blueprint of its subject matter."⁵ More generally: "For most minds, once doctrine is sighted and is held to be the completion of insight, the doctrinal mode of thinking seems the only one possible. When doctrine totters it seems it can fall only into the gulf of bewilderment; few minds risk the fall; most seize the remnants and swear the edifice remains, when doctrine becomes intolerable dogma."⁶ It makes no difference to the case if the dogma is religious, political, social, or psychological, or if the formula is applied on behalf of one cause or another. Either way is death to critical intelligence and the experience of reading a poem or a novel. A formula is a form congealed.

Blackmur kept this emphasis in play. He proposed a distinction between Henry Adams and Henry James, with *The Education of Henry Adams* and James's *Notes of a Son and Brother* as the relevant books:

Both men were concerned with experience as education, and to both the judgment of education called for a specialized form of autobiography in which the individual was suppressed in the act, only to be caught in the style. James imagined human reality always through dramatizing the bris-

ting sensual record of the instance—almost any instance that had a story in it—and let the pattern, the type, the *vis à tergo*, take care of itself, which under the stress of the imaginative process it commonly did. Adams, on the other hand, tended in a given case to depend on his feeling for human type and pattern—for history and lines of force—as the source of drama, and hence saw the individual as generalized *first*: so that whatever happened would fall into the pattern, if you only had the wit to see how—which Adams by the strength of his conceptual imagination did commonly see. To put it another way, Adams's set of intellectual instruments more or less *pre-dicted* what he would discover; James resorted to instruments only to ascertain what his sensibility had *already* discovered.⁷

I was pleased, too, that the New Critics spoke of culture as if it did not coincide at every point with the interests of the state. It has been alleged that the pedagogical method they employed—practical criticism, close work on texts—is inherently conservative and that it is designed to imply that social harmony has the force of natural law. David Lloyd and Paul Thomas argue that the politics of “culture” is always conservative: “Culture is, to a civil society conceived as the site of the war of all against all, a domain of reconciliation precisely as is the state. But while the function of the state is to mediate conflicts among interest groups, it is the function of culture to interpellate individuals into the disposition to disinterested reflection that makes the state's mediations possible. . . . The importance of the discourse on culture lies in its theorization of an extrapolitical, extraeconomic space in which ‘freedom’ and ‘the harmonious development of the whole person’ can be pursued as the very ground on which representational politics can be practised.”⁸ But literature and music can be attended to only in such a space. If I am listening to a quartet by Bartók or reading *Nostromo*, I should not be using the occasion to plan my next move in the class struggle or the war of all against all. If I were teaching one of those works, I would assume that I was in that extrapolitical, extraeconomic space at least for the time being. Besides, close reading was practiced equally by critics on the Right—Ransom, Brooks, and Tate—and by those on the Left—Empson and Burke. It was Burke who wrote a book called *Counter-Statement* and who formulated there a motto for the workings of the literary imagination: when in Rome, do as the Greeks. His first work of fiction was a grim comedy called *Towards a Better Life*. He always thought of the arts as bohemian counterstatements to the statements made by society and other

institutions. Blackmur held that the civil purpose of literature was to remind the powers that be, simple and corrupt as they are, of the forces they have to control. It is an error to claim that the New Critics were in league with the White House and Wall Street or that those who were also Agrarians wanted to effect a strategic retreat south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

To cite a small piece of evidence: what is irony—the trope so much favored by Eliot, Brooks, Ransom, Burke, and Blackmur—but an act of the mind that refuses the destiny of official thought? In his essay on Andrew Marvell, Eliot chose to call irony “wit” and to say that “it involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible.”⁹ I don’t find a sinister “politics of culture” at work in that sentence. Or in Adorno’s statement that art is art because it is not nature. One doesn’t need to look far into *Aesthetic Theory* to find Adorno saying that “aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by reality’s compulsion to identity” and later that “art allies itself with repressed and dominated nature in the progressively rationalized and integrated society.”¹⁰ I don’t claim that these few citations make the case, but they should discourage the current habit among intellectuals of trying to make bourgeois liberals feel ashamed of themselves.

In Dublin I eventually looked for an aesthetic theory among the New Critics, but with little success. Philip Blair Rice, Ransom’s colleague at Kenyon College, published a few helpful essays in the *Kenyon Review*. Ransom turned Kant’s third Critique to his own purposes. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe Beardsley wrote of literature in relation to philosophic and aesthetic issues. But none of these was decisive. Reading further afield, I was much taken with Philip Wheelwright’s *The Burning Fountain* and, when I belatedly came to it, Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*. But these didn’t quite satisfy. They seemed to be theories of myth rather than of literature. I knew that myth was important, but I couldn’t be convinced that literature and myth were, in effect as well as in nature, one and the same. When Frye read a poem or a novel he seemed to survey it from an immense height and to discern mainly the pattern he was looking for, a seasonal myth that evidently accounted for everything by making it predictable. But he didn’t see much detail. He was like Henry Adams in Blackmur’s comparison of Adams with James. Wheelwright, too, wrote of literature as if he were mainly interested in rites, myths, and rituals. *The*

Burning Fountain was instructive on the different kinds of imagination, but I wanted something more or something else.

I don't know when I first read Susanne K. Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*, but I recall that Donald Davie recommended it to me. He taught at the University of Dublin, Trinity College. We were friends, though we quarreled in later years when I reviewed in *Partisan Review* his book on Ezra Pound in the Modern Masters series. While it lasted and now again in sad retrospect, our friendship was a vivid part of my life in Dublin. I remember with special warmth being with him one day in his rooms at Trinity when he took down from the shelf a slim volume of Yvor Winters's poems and read "On Teaching the Young." In subsequent years when I have read the poem aloud and come to the last line, "Laurel, archaic, rude," I find myself trying to speak it in Davie's rigorous Yorkshire accent. Well, too late now. We shared books, articles, and the poems he wrote; though on the one occasion when I suggested a minor change in a poem, he declined the suggestion. Why he urged *Philosophy in a New Key* on me, I can't recall: in the event, it meant more to me than to him. I went on to read Langer's *Feeling and Form* and to be convinced that I had found the aesthetic theory I needed. Davie wrote about Langer in his *Articulate Energy*, but he didn't concern himself with the aesthetic questions that preoccupied me.

Feeling and Form satisfied me because it was predicated on music and therefore attentive to form, rhythm, cadence, and the texture of sounds. But the chapter I found most suggestive was the one in which Langer explained the fundamental concept of virtuality. It was not—or so I gather—virtuality as computer scientists use that term. Langer's virtuality is the quality of something that is created only to be perceived. The thing created exists in the ordinary world and may be put to ordinary purposes, but those purposes occlude its artistic or virtual character. Music is virtual time, architecture is virtual space, dance is virtual movement. The mode of existence of every work of art is virtual. If we approach it in another spirit, we deal with it opportunistically. The cathedral at Chartres is a place of worship; we enter its space to attend Mass, but when we look at it as a work of architecture, we observe its virtual character, its aesthetic relation to possibilities of spatial form, rhythm, contrast, and so forth. It has been created as a church, but as a work of architecture it exists only for perception. Music, to Langer as to Walter Pater, is