

HOW TO READ
AND WHY



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Harold Bloom
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The reader became the book; and summer night
Was like the conscious being of the book.

—WALLACE STEVENS

HOW TO READ
AND WHY

PREFACE

There is no single way to read well, though there is a prime reason why we should read. Information is endlessly available to us; where shall wisdom be found? If you are fortunate, you encounter a particular teacher who can help, yet finally you are alone, going on without further mediation. Reading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you, because it is, at least in my experience, the most healing of pleasures. It returns you to otherness, whether in yourself or in friends, or in those who may become friends. Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness. We read not only because we cannot know enough people, but because friendship is so vulnerable, so likely to diminish or disappear, overcome by space, time, imperfect sympathies, and all the sorrows of familial and passional life.

This book teaches how to read and why, proceeding by a multitude of examples and instances: poems short and long; stories and novels and plays. The selections should not be interpreted as an exclusive list of what to read, but rather as a sampling of works that best illustrate why to read. Reading well is best pursued as an implicit discipline; finally there is no method but yourself, when your self has been fully molded. Literary criticism, as I have learned to understand it, ought to be experiential and pragmatic, rather than theoretical. The critics who are my masters—Dr. Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt in particular—practice their art in order to make what is implicit in a book finely explicit. In what follows, whether I deal with a lyric by A. E. Housman or a play by Oscar Wilde, with a story by Jorge Luis Borges or a novel by Mar-

Emerson, fierce enemy of history and of all historicisms, who remarked that the best books “impress us with the conviction, that one nature wrote and the same reads.” Let me fuse Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson into a formula of how to read: find what comes near to you that can be put to the use of weighing and considering, and that addresses you as though you share the one nature, free of time’s tyranny. Pragmatically that means, first find Shakespeare, and let him find you. If *King Lear* is fully to find you, then weigh and consider the nature it shares with you; its closeness to yourself. I do not intend this as an idealism, but as a pragmatism. Putting the tragedy to use as a complaint against patriarchy is to forsake your own prime interests, particularly as a young woman, which sounds rather more ironical than it is. Shakespeare, more than Sophocles, is the inescapable authority upon intergenerational conflict, and more than anyone else, upon the differences between women and men. Be open to a full reading of *King Lear*, and you will understand better the origins of what you judge to be patriarchy.

Ultimately we read—as Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson agree—in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests. We experience such augmentations as pleasure, which may be why aesthetic values have always been deprecated by social moralists, from Plato through our current campus Puritans. The pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else’s life by reading better or more deeply. I remain skeptical of the traditional social hope that care for others may be stimulated by the growth of individual imagination, and I am wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good.

The sorrow of professional reading is that you recapture only rarely the pleasure of reading you knew in youth, when books were a Hazlittian gusto. The way we read now partly depends upon our distance, inner or outer, from the universities, where reading is scarcely taught as a pleasure, in any of the deeper senses of the aes-

thetics of pleasure. Opening yourself to a direct confrontation with Shakespeare at his strongest, as in *King Lear*, is never an easy pleasure, whether in youth or in age, and yet not to read *King Lear* fully (which means without ideological expectations) is to be cognitively as well as aesthetically defrauded. A childhood largely spent watching television yields to an adolescence with a computer, and the university receives a student unlikely to welcome the suggestion that we must endure our going hence even as our going hither: ripeness is all. Reading falls apart, and much of the self scatters with it. All this is past lamenting, and will not be remedied by any vows or programs. What is to be done can only be performed by some version of elitism, and that is now unacceptable, for reasons both good and bad. There are still solitary readers, young and old, everywhere, even in the universities. If there is a function of criticism at the present time, it must be to address itself to the solitary reader, who reads for herself, and not for the interests that supposedly transcend the self.

Value, in literature as in life, has much to do with the idiosyncratic, with the excess by which meaning gets started. It is not accidental that historicists—critics who believe all of us to be overdetermined by societal history—should also regard literary characters as marks upon a page, and nothing more. Hamlet is not even a case history if our thoughts are not at all our own. I come then to the first principle if we are to restore the way we read now, a principle I appropriate from Dr. Johnson: *Clear your mind of cant*. Your dictionary will tell you that *cant* in this sense is speech overflowing with pious platitudes, the peculiar vocabulary of a sect or coven. Since the universities have empowered such covens as “gender and sexuality” and “multiculturalism,” Johnson’s admonition thus becomes “Clear your mind of academic cant.” A university culture where the appreciation of Victorian women’s underwear replaces the appreciation of Charles Dickens and Robert Browning sounds like the outrageousness of a new Nathanael West, but is merely

the norm. A side product of such "cultural poetics" is that there can be no new Nathanael West, for how could such an academic culture sustain parody? The poems of our climate have been replaced by the body stockings of our culture. Our new Materialists tell us that they have recovered the body for historicism, and assert that they work in the name of the Reality Principle. The life of the mind must yield to the death of the body, yet that hardly requires the cheerleading of an academic sect.

Clear your mind of cant leads on to the second principle of restoring reading: *Do not attempt to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood by what or how you read.* Self-improvement is a large enough project for your mind and spirit: there are no ethics of reading. The mind should be kept at home until its primal ignorance has been purged; premature excursions into activism have their charm, but are time-consuming, and for reading there will never be enough time. Historicizing, whether of past or present, is a kind of idolatry, an obsessive worship of things in time. Read therefore by the inner light that John Milton celebrated and that Emerson took as a principle of reading, which can be our third: *A scholar is a candle which the love and desire of all men will light.* Wallace Stevens, perhaps forgetting his source, wrote marvelous variations upon that metaphor, but the original Emersonian phrasing makes for a clearer statement of the third principle of reading. You need not fear that the freedom of your development as a reader is selfish, because if you become an authentic reader, then the response to your labors will confirm you as an illumination to others. I ponder the letters that I receive from strangers these last seven or eight years, and generally I am too moved to reply. Their pathos, for me, is that all too often they testify to a yearning for canonical literary study that universities disdain to fulfill. Emerson said that society cannot do without cultivated men and women, and prophetically he added: "The people, and not the college, is the writer's home." He meant strong writers, representative men

and women, who represented themselves, and not constituencies, since his politics were those of the spirit.

The largely forgotten function of a university education is caught forever in Emerson's address "The American Scholar," when he says of the scholar's duties: "They may all be comprised in self-trust." I take from Emerson also my fourth principle of reading: *One must be an inventor to read well.* "Creative reading" in Emerson's sense I once named as "misreading," a word that persuaded opponents that I suffered from a voluntary dyslexia. The ruin or blank that they see when they look at a poem is in their own eye. Self-trust is not an endowment, but is the Second Birth of the mind, which cannot come without years of deep reading. There are no absolute standards for the aesthetic. If you wish to maintain that Shakespeare's ascendancy was a product of colonialism, then who will bother to confute you? Shakespeare after four centuries is more pervasive than ever he was before; they will perform him in outer space, and on other worlds, if those worlds are reached. He is not a conspiracy of Western culture; he *contains* every principle of reading, and he is my touchstone throughout this book. Borges attributed this universalism to Shakespeare's apparent selflessness, but that quality is a large metaphor for Shakespeare's difference, which finally is cognitive power as such. We read, frequently if unknowingly, in quest of a mind more original than our own.

Since ideology, particularly in its shallower versions, is peculiarly destructive of the capacity to apprehend and appreciate irony, I suggest that the *recovery of the ironic* might be our fifth principle for the restoration of reading. Think of the endless irony of Hamlet, who when he says one thing almost invariably means another, frequently indeed the opposite of what he says. But with this principle, I am close to despair, since you can no more teach someone to be ironic than you can instruct them to become solitary. And yet the loss of irony is the death of reading, and of what had been civilized in our natures.

I stepped from Plank to Plank
 A slow and cautious way
 The Stars about my Head I felt
 About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
 Would be my final inch—
 This gave me that precarious Gait
 Some call Experience.

Women and men can walk differently, but unless we are regimented we all tend to walk somewhat individually. Dickinson, master of the precarious Sublime, can hardly be apprehended if we are dead to her ironies. She is walking the only path available, "from Plank to Plank," but her slow caution ironically juxtaposes with a titanism in which she feels "The Stars about my Head," though her feet very nearly are in the sea. Not knowing whether the next step will be her "final inch" gives her "that precarious Gait" she will not name, except to tell us that "some" call it Experience. She had read Emerson's essay "Experience," a culmination much in the way "Of Experience" was for his master Montaigne, and her irony is an amiable response to Emerson's opening: "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none." The extreme, for Dickinson, is the not knowing whether the next step is the final inch. "If any of us knew what we were doing, or where we are going, then when we think we best know!" Emerson's further reverie differs from Dickinson's in temperament, or as she words it, in gait. "All things swim and glitter," in Emerson's realm of experience, and his genial irony is very different from her irony of precariousness. Yet neither is an ideologue, and they live still in the rival power of their ironies.

At the end of the path of lost irony is a final inch, beyond which literary value will be irrecoverable. Irony is only a metaphor, and the irony of one literary age can rarely be the irony of another, yet

without the renaissance of an ironic sense more than what we once called imaginative literature will be lost. Thomas Mann, most ironic of this century's great writers, seems to be lost already. 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. That is akin to studying Shakespeare mostly for his apparent bisexuality, but the vagaries of our current counter-Puritanism seem limitless. Shakespeare's ironies, as we would expect, are the most comprehensive and dialectical in all of Western literature, and yet they do not always mediate his characters' passions for us, so vast and intense is their emotional range. Shakespeare therefore will survive our era; we will lose his ironies, and hold on to the rest of him. But in Thomas Mann every emotion, narrative or dramatic, is mediated by an ironic aestheticism; to teach *Death in Venice* or *Disorder and Early Sorrow* to most current undergraduates, even the gifted, is nearly impossible. When authors are destroyed by history, we rightly call their work period pieces, but when they are made unavailable through historicized ideology, I think that we encounter a different phenomenon.

Irony demands a certain attention span, and the ability to sustain antithetical ideas, even when they collide with one another. Strip irony away from reading, and it loses at once all discipline and all surprise. Find now what comes near to you, that can be used for weighing and considering, and it very likely will be irony, even if many of your teachers will not know what it is, or where it is to be found. Irony will clear your mind of the cant of the ideologues, and help you to blaze forth as the scholar of one candle.

Going on seventy, one doesn't want to read badly any more than live badly, since time will not relent. I don't know that we owe God or nature a death, but nature will collect anyway, and we certainly owe mediocrity nothing, whatever collectivity it purports to advance or at least represent.

Because my ideal reader, for half a century, has been Dr. Samuel Johnson, I turn next to my favorite passage in his *Preface to Shakespeare*:

This, therefore, is the praise of Shakespeare, that his drama is the mirror of life; that he who has mazed his imagination in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world and a confessor predict the progress of the passions.

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, and Shakespeare speaks to as much of you as you can bring to him. That is to say: Shakespeare reads you more fully than you can read him, even after you have cleared your mind of cant. No writer before or since Shakespeare has had anything like his control of perspectivism, which outleaps any contextualizations we impose upon the plays. Johnson, admirably perceiving this, urges us to allow Shakespeare to cure us of our "delirious ecstasies." Let me extend Johnson by also urging us to recognize the phantoms that the deep reading of Shakespeare will exorcise. One such phantom is the Death of the Author; another is the assertion that the self is a fiction; yet another is the opinion that literary and dramatic characters are so many marks upon a page. A fourth phantom, and the most pernicious, is that language does the thinking for us.

Still, my love for Johnson, and for reading, turns me at last away from polemic, and towards a celebration of the many solitary readers I keep encountering, whether in the classroom or in messages I receive. We read Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Dickens, Proust, and all their peers because they more than enlarge life. Pragmatically, they have become the Blessing, in its true Yahwistic sense of "more life into a time without boundaries." We read

deeply for varied reasons, most of them familiar: that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are. Yet the strongest, most authentic motive for deep reading of the now much-abused traditional canon is the search for a difficult pleasure. I am not exactly an erotics-of-reading purveyor, and a pleasurable difficulty seems to me a plausible definition of the Sublime, but a higher pleasure remains the reader's quest. There is a reader's Sublime, and it seems the only secular transcendence we can ever attain, except for the even more precarious transcendence we call "falling in love." I urge you to find what truly comes near to you, that can be used for weighing and for considering. Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads.

I

SHORT STORIES

Introduction

The Irish writer Frank O'Connor celebrated the short story in his *Lonely Voice*, believing that it dealt best with isolated individuals, particularly those upon society's fringes. If this were wholly true, the short story would have developed almost into the opposite of one of its likeliest origins, the folktale. Then the short story, unlike the lyrical poem, would wound once and once only, and also unlike novels, which can afflict us with many sensations, with multiple sorrows and joys. But so indeed can the stories of Chekhov and his few peers.

Short stories are not parables or wise sayings, and so cannot be fragments; we ask them for the pleasures of closure. Kafka's magnificent fragment, "The Hunter Gracchus," ends when the undead hunter, a kind of Wandering Jew or Ancient Mariner, is asked by a sea town's mayor how long he intends to prolong his visit. "I cannot tell, Burgomeister," Gracchus replies: "... My ship has no rudder and is driven by a wind that rises from the icy regions of death." That is not closure, but what could Kafka have added? Gracchus's final sentence is more memorable than all but a few deliberate endings of stories.

How does one read a short story? Edgar Allan Poe would have said: at one sitting. Poe's stories, despite their permanent, world-

wide popularity, are atrociously written (as are his poems) and benefit by translation, even into English. But Poe is hardly one of the authentic ancestors of the modern short story. These include Pushkin and Balzac, Gogol and Turgenev, Maupassant and Chekhov and Henry James. The modern masters of the form are James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, Isaak Babel and Ernest Hemingway, and a varied group including Borges, Nabokov, Thomas Mann, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Tommaso Landolfi, and Italo Calvino. I will center here upon stories by Turgenev and by Chekhov, by Maupassant and by Hemingway, by Flannery O'Connor and by Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges, Tommaso Landolfi and by Italo Calvino, because all of them achieved something like perfection in their art.

Ivan Turgenev

Frank O'Connor set Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1852) over any other single volume of short stories. A century and a half after its composition, *Sketches* remains astonishingly fresh, though its topicality, the need to emancipate the serfs, has yielded to all the disasters of Russian history. Turgenev's stories are uncannily beautiful; taken together, they are as magnificent an answer to the question "Why read?" as I know (always excepting Shakespeare). Turgenev, who loved Shakespeare and Cervantes, divided up all mankind (of the questing sort) into either Hamlets or Don Quixotes. He might have added Falstaffs or Sancho Panzas, since with Hamlet and the Don, they form a fourfold paradigm for so many other fictive beings.

It is difficult to single out particular stories from the twenty-five in *Sketches*, but I join several other critics in a special fondness for "Bezhin Lea" (or "meadow") and "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands." "Bezhin Lea" begins on a beautiful July morning, with

Turgenev out grouse-shooting. The hunter loses his way and comes at night to a meadowland where a group of five peasant boys sit around two fires. Joining them, Turgenev introduces us to them. They range in age from seven to fourteen, and all of them believe in "goblins," "the little people," who share their world. Turgenev's art wisely allows the boys to talk to one another, while he listens and does not intrude. Their life of hard work (they and their parents are serfs), superstition, village legend, is revealed to us, complete with Trishka, the Antichrist to come, enticing mermaids who catch souls, the walking dead, and those marked to die. One boy, Pavlusha, stands out from the rest as the most intelligent and likable. He demonstrates his courage when he rushes forth bare-handed to drive away what could be wolves, who threaten the grazing horses that the boys guard in the night.

After some hours, Turgenev falls asleep, to wake up just before dawn. The boys sleep on, though Pavlusha raises himself up for a last, intense glance at the hunter. Turgenev starts home, describing the beautiful morning, and then ends the sketch by adding that, later that year, Pavlusha died in a fall from a horse. We feel the pity of the loss, with Turgenev, who remarks that Pavlusha was a fine boy, but the pathos of the death is not rendered as such. A continuum engages us: the beauty of the meadow and of the dawn; the vividness of the boys' preternatural beliefs; the fate, not to be evaded, that takes away Pavlusha. And the rest? That is the pragmatic yet somehow still quixotic Turgenev, shooting his grouse and sketching the boys and the landscape in his album.

Why read "Bezhin Lea"? At the least, to know better our own reality, our vulnerability to fate, while learning also to appreciate aesthetically Turgenev's tact and only apparent detachment as a storyteller. If there is any irony in this sketch, it belongs to fate itself, a fate just about as innocent as the landscape, the boys, the hunter. Turgenev is one of the most Shakespearean of writers in that he too refrains from moral judgments; he also knows that a favorite, like Pavlusha, will vanish by a sudden accident. There is

no single interpretative point to carry away from the Bezhin meadow. The narrative voice is not to be distinguished from Turgenev's own self, which is wisely passive, loving, meticulously observant. That self, like Pavlusha's, is part of the story's value. Something in most of us is where it wants to be, with the boys, the horses, the compassionate hunter-writer, the talk of goblins and river temptresses, in perfect weather, in Bezhin Lea.

To achieve Turgenev's apparent simplicity as a writer of sketches you need the highest gifts, something very like Shakespeare's genius for rediscovering the human. Turgenev too shows us something that perhaps is always there, but that we could not see without him. Dostoevsky learned from Shakespeare how to create the supreme nihilists Svidrigailov and Stavrogin by observing Iago, satanic majesty of all nihilists. Turgenev, like Henry James, learned something subtler from Shakespeare: the mystery of the seemingly commonplace, the rendering of a reality that is perpetually augmenting.

Directly after "Bezhin Lea" comes "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands," where Turgenev gives us a fully miraculous character, the dwarf Kasyan, a mystical serf and faith healer, perhaps a sect of one. Returning from a hunting trip, the author's horse-drawn cart suffers a broken axle. In a nearby town that is no town, Turgenev and his surly driver encounter

a dwarf of about fifty years old, with a small, swarthy, wrinkled face, a little painted nose, barely discernible little brown eyes and abundant curly black hair which sat upon his tiny head just as broadly as the cap sits on the stalk of a mushroom. His entire body was extraordinarily frail and thin . . .

(Translated by Richard Freeborn)

We are constantly reminded how uncanny, how unexpected Kasyan truly is. Though his voice invariably is gentle and sweet, he severely condemns hunting as ungodly, and he maintains throughout a strong dignity, as well as the sorrow of an exile,

resettled by the authorities and so deprived of "the beautiful lands" of the Don region. Everything about little Kasyan is paradoxical; Turgenev's driver explains that the dwarf is a holy man known as The Flea.

Hunter and healer go off together for a walk in the woods while the axle is being mended. Gathering herbs, jumping as he goes, muttering to himself, Kasyan speaks to the birds in their own language, but says not a word to Turgenev. Driven by the heat to find shelter together in the bushes, hunter and holy dwarf enjoy their silent reveries until Kasyan demands justification for the shooting of birds. When Turgenev asks the dwarf's occupation, Kasyan replies that he catches nightingales to give them away to others, that he is literate, and admits his healing powers. And though he says he has no family, his secret is revealed when his small, teenage natural daughter, Annushka, suddenly appears in the woods. The child is beautiful and shy, and has been out gathering mushrooms. Though Kasyan denies his parentage, neither we nor Turgenev are persuaded, and after the child departs, Kasyan scarcely speaks for the remainder of the story.

We are left with enigmas, as his driver can scarcely enlighten Turgenev when they depart; to him Kasyan is nothing but contradictions: "untellable." Nothing more is told, and Turgenev returns home. His thoughts on Kasyan remain unexpressed, but do we need them? The peasant healer lives in his own world, not the Russia of the serfs but a Russian vision of the biblical world, albeit totally unlike the rival biblical visions of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Kasyan, though he shies away from rebellion, has rejected Russian society and returned to the arts and ways of the folk. He will not let his daughter abide a moment in the presence of the benign Turgenev, who admires the child's beauty. One need not idealize Kasyan; his peasant shrewdness and perceptions exclude a great deal of value, but he incarnates truths of folklore that he himself may scarcely know that he knows.

The dominant atmosphere of Turgenev's sketches is the beauty