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Philip Davis

READING and the READER

THE LITERARY AGENDA

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For the grandsons, Leo and Chester

Series Introduction

The Crisis in, the Threat to, the Plight of the Humanities: enter these phrases in Google's search engine and there are 23 million results, in a great fifty-year-long cry of distress, outrage, fear, and melancholy. Grant, even, that every single anxiety and complaint in that catalogue of woe is fully justified—the lack of public support for the arts, the cutbacks in government funding for the humanities, the imminent transformation of a literary and verbal culture by visual/virtual/digital media, the decline of reading... And still, though it were all true, and just because it might be, there would remain the problem of the response itself. Too often there's recourse to the shrill moan of offended piety or a defeatist withdrawal into professionalism.

The Literary Agenda is a series of short polemical monographs that believes there is a great deal that needs to be said about the state of literary education inside schools and universities and more fundamentally about the importance of literature and of reading in the wider world. The category of 'the literary' has always been contentious. What *is* clear, however, is how increasingly it is dismissed or is unrecognized as a way of thinking or an arena for thought. It is sceptically challenged from within, for example, by the sometimes rival claims of cultural history, contextualized explanation, or media studies. It is shaken from without by even greater pressures: by economic exigency and the severe social attitudes that can follow from it; by technological change that may leave the traditional forms of serious human communication looking merely antiquated. For just these reasons this is the right time for renewal, to start reinvigorated work into the meaning and value of literary reading for the sake of the future.

It is certainly no time to retreat within institutional walls. For all the academic resistance to 'instrumentalism', to governmental measurements of public impact and practical utility, literature exists in and across society. The 'literary' is not pure or specialized or self-confined; it is not restricted to the practitioner in writing or the academic in studying. It exists in the whole range of the world which is its subject matter: it consists in what non-writers actively receive

from writings when, for example, they start to see the world more imaginatively as a result of reading novels and begin to think more carefully about human personality. It comes from literature making available much of human life that would not otherwise be existent to thought or recognizable as knowledge. If it is true that involvement in literature, so far from being a minority aesthetic, represents a significant contribution to the life of human thought, then that idea has to be argued at the public level without succumbing to a hollow rhetoric or bowing to a reductive world-view. Hence the effort of this series to take its place *between* literature and the world. The double-sided commitment to occupying that place and establishing its reality is the only 'agenda' here, without further prescription as to what should then be thought or done within it.

What is at stake is not simply some defensive or apologetic 'justification' in the abstract. The case as to why literature matters in the world not only has to be argued conceptually and strongly tested by thought, it should be given presence, performed, and brought to life in the way that literature itself does. That is why this series includes the writers themselves, the novelists and poets, in order to try to close the gap between the thinking of the artists and the thinking of those who read and study them. It is why it also involves other kinds of thinkers—the philosopher, the theologian, the psychologist, the neuroscientist—examining the role of literature within their own life's work and thought, and the effect of that work, in turn, upon literary thinking. This series admits and encourages personal voices in an unpredictable variety of individual approach and expression, speaking wherever possible across countries and disciplines and temperaments. It aims for something more than intellectual assent: rather the literary sense of what it is like to feel the thought, to embody an idea in a person, to bring it to being in a narrative or in aid of adventurous reflection. If the artists refer to their own works, if other thinkers return to ideas that have marked much of their working life, that is not their vanity nor a failure of originality. It is what the series has asked of them: to speak out of what they know and care about, in whatever language can best serve their most serious thinking, and without the necessity of trying to cover every issue or meet every objection in each volume.

Philip Davis

Preface

In the words of psychoanalyst W. R. Bion:

> If a person cannot 'think' with his thoughts, that is to say that he has thoughts but lacks the apparatus of 'thinking' which enables him to use his thoughts, to think them as it were, then the personality is incapable of learning from experience. This failure is serious. Failure to eat, drink or breathe properly has disastrous consequences for life itself. Failure to use emotional experience produces a comparable disaster in the development of the personality.[1]

This book is about how literature helps its readers to think such thoughts, thoughts that otherwise may be personally unavailable to them or that go unrecognized and undervalued in the world outside.

To do this, I cannot just talk *about* reading or abstractly describe it, when that is precisely not what I shall claim to be a literary way of thinking. Rather, reading is something that must be done, with immersed attention, inside specific examples. The shared examples offered to the reader throughout this book, to tell its story and make its argument, are neither intentionally polemical nor over-deliberately inclusive but, inevitably, personal choices gathered without plan in the course of a life and triggered by present occasions. That in itself is part of the book's subject matter: how people find for themselves, through their reading, specific deep places for contemplation.

Thinking of the great list in Philippians—whatsoever things are honest, are just, pure, lovely, of good report, think of these things—Iris Murdoch concludes, 'Every individual has a collection of such things.'[2] That personal collection or mental library must also have room here for the things in life that are of pain, mistake, temptation, and difficulty. In short, I include thinking that has arisen out of work I have previously done on Shakespeare, the Victorians, Samuel Johnson, Bernard Malamud, and various aspects of the experience of reading, in an attempt at summation of a reading life.

But for different people, of course, there must be different authors and different books that matter, and different places of emphasis

within them. There is, rightly, a wide variety of literature(s) and many different views about what literature is: mine is a personal view, as befits a series that aims to offer a range of such. 'I am what I am or I am nothing,' says J. H. Newman, 'I cannot think, reflect, or judge about my being, without starting from the very point which I aim at concluding.' But, he adds, 'if I do not use myself, I have no other self to use'.[3]

In what follows, Chapter 1 is an account of how literature offers its readers what I call a 'holding-ground' for thinking about experience, and what are its characteristics. Chapter 2 goes further into the experience of what it is like to do careful reading-work within that arena, with all the extra human potential it offers through a form of thinking not pre-determined but pitched in the midst of life between first and last things. Chapter 3 asks what is the relation between that literary holding-ground and the world itself, in the exploratory search for meaning. Each chapter begins with an introduction and is divided into sections (three in the first two chapters, two in the last), with each section sub-divided by headings which are intended to allow the reader more easily to enter into the literary examples without loss of the argument. I can't say how many influences, books, and people, have gone into this work, but I am not ungrateful.

Philip Davis

Liverpool

Notes

1. W. R. Bion, *Learning From Experience* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 84.
2. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 335.
3. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, first published 1870, chapter 9, section 1.

Contents

1
Not Names but Places

Introduction

Wordsworth is a writer who frequently offers the exploratory reader in the midst of life a place from which to start. Trying to find access to his own thoughts, Wordsworth spoke of remembering *how* he felt at a particular time, but *what* exactly he felt he did not recall:

> but that the soul,
> Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
> Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
> Of possible sublimity, to which
> With growing faculties she doth aspire,
> With faculties still growing, feeling still
> That whatsoever point they gain, they yet
> Have something to pursue.
> (*The Prelude* (1805), 2.334–41)

The 'how' that Wordsworth works from here—the obscure, possible, growing feeling of inchoate thoughts—is not merely the how of ornamental literary style, of how most exquisitely to phrase what one already exhaustively knows. It is more like the poet on a walk whom Proust describes—halted for some time by some thought or object, then returning home quickly and silently as though 'afraid of spilling' what he has gathered, before ever he has had the chance to get it into the care of words.[1]

In A. S. Byatt's novel *Still Life* a woman sits in a library, first time away from her recently born baby, reading Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' in an attempt to get back some of the thinking-time she took for granted as a single, unencumbered student. She now has a husband, a baby, responsibilities, worries, and little time; yet she

says to herself that she must not think about those things for the while but of the 'Immortality Ode' instead. Only then she thinks: all these things—the potential of a baby, the burdens of an adult, the movement of both loss and gain in going from one to the other—*are* what the poem is about. But that does not make it a set of itemized ideas; it makes it a place of refuge in which to find and sift her thoughts. So, connection made again, she reads the poem once more, closer to herself, until suddenly she sees how two quite separate little uses of the word 'deep' silently link and work together in the poem, creating between them again a glimpse of that vision of the power of darkness essential to Wordsworth. What she has done is perhaps nothing much after all, since she soon finds it settle back into a banal and easy insight; but for the time in which it happened it was, indeed, like a moment of vision.

For the attentive reader of Wordsworth or Proust, the 'how' is not to be converted too quickly into the 'what'—the theme or message. Theirs is a language to be examined intently in 'deep', for its reactivated surprises and secrets, as if it were not just a medium of simple external communication but a means of opening and reopening, innerly shifting and deepening, mental pathways. Otherwise, what we all too often have to offer instead are our ready-made opinions and clichéd agendas; the acceptable social attitudes and the habitual stories of one's self that make nothing new.

It is easy enough to spot these formulae in others. There is a recent book by Barbara Ehrenreich called *Smile or Die* which is sub-titled 'How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World'. In it the author lists the often cruelly coercive assumptions of the life-coaches, the motivational thinkers, and their self-help books in their insistence on thinking positively—and only positively.

The vocabulary is predictable, and it determines the thinking that goes with it. 'To be disappointed, resentful or downcast' is to show yourself to be nothing more than a 'victim', a 'loser', or a 'whiner'. 'If you expect things to get better,' it is urged in the best-selling self-help manuals, 'they will.' After all, in life, we are told, 'we all make choices'. Consequently in the simple pluses and minuses of this accountancy, what is not going your way in life is disposable. So it is with people: 'Get rid of negative people in your life. They waste your time and bring you down. If you can't get rid of them (like a

spouse or a boss), reduce your time with them.' As it is with thoughts: 'Whenever a negative thought concerning your personal powers comes to mind, deliberately voice a positive thought to cancel it out.' Accordingly, even as he gave out redundancy-notices, one employer was confidently claiming: 'People do come to see that losing a job was a step forward in their lives.' Herself diagnosed with malignant breast neoplasm, Ehrenreich did not relish the invitation to 'embrace cancer' or the public testimonies of those who had: 'If I had to do it over again, would I want breast cancer? Absolutely. I'm not the same person I was, and I'm glad I'm not.' This is a willed optimism, she concludes, an over-determined expectation, in place of the language of hope. 'Positive thinking' is an ideology in denial of genuine thinking, whereas hope is a vulnerable emotion which knows it is not entirely within its yearner's control, any more than in control of the future.

But the problem is not simply to do with what one can see easily enough in the extremes of others. Rather it is to do with a defective equipment for thinking in oneself, equipment not so flawed, however, that one cannot continue unthinkingly using it. I mean such habits of mind—sustained within an insidiously lazy default language—as trap their owners within the set tracks that precisely avoid the reality of what they think they are talking about.

One of the most frightening accounts of that almost unavoidable and unrecognizable self-blindness is in John Stuart Mill's essay on the philosopher Bentham, his father's mentor in the creation of utilitarianism, the measuring of usefulness. What Bentham proposed was that the utility of all human concerns could be quantified in terms of a simple calculation of the balance of pain and of pleasure in any individual or any number of individuals in society. The principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest possible number' was a radical measure of human benefit designed to steer public policy through the confusion of a new industrialized, urban mass society. But when, even in this, Bentham is wrong

> it is not because the considerations which he urges are not rational and valid in themselves, but because some more important principle, which he did not perceive, supersedes those considerations. The bad part of his writings is his resolute denial of all that he does not see, of all truths but those which he recognises. ('Bentham', 1838)

This should be the great fear of the thinker who would be comprehensive and systematic: that whatever element is, even unknowingly, omitted or forgotten at the beginning of enquiry will cause the conclusions to fail at the end of it. It is like setting up our rocket on the launch-pad half a degree out of true: once launched we travel on not knowing how far, increasingly, we are lost in space. 'Nobody's synthesis', Mill concludes, 'can be more complete than his analysis.'

But what literature does, which formal philosophy for example commonly does not—and what literature can hardly help doing—is yield more than its writers know. In thinking about human life, it offers as much excess, untidied material as it can by not only thinking but re-creating the very objects of thought—offering more from within the very middle of things, I will argue, than a more secondary discipline can provide with more formally set starts and goals. Writers offer this by creating not so much a line of argument as a resonant space for thinking. In a book on his reading called *A Dish of Orts* (1893), the Victorian fantasy writer George MacDonald speaks of Wordsworth as a poet not so much offering ideas as putting the reader into the *places* (physical, mental, and situational) from which such ideas originally arise so that they come of themselves.[2]

To a literary thinker there is always what Bergson called the invisible 'fringe' of meaning, where fringe signifies all that which darkly surrounded the evolution of a distinct idea, as its origin and its potential.[3] What it comes out of, what it goes towards, still latently and subliminally surrounds that final idea which thoughts become. It is proper that thoughts become consolidated into a shorthand 'idea', something in which mentally to carry them around, for use; but it is not all right when in turn the idea becomes deadened into dry residual opinion. To bring ideas back to life, they need places in which to *be* thought again, places closely approximate to the origin that stimulated them into being, where there is room to maximize that aura or resonance which lies around and behind an idea, so as to be thought and felt again as if for the first time.

But when our thoughts get separated from the memory of the places or occasions or people that first brought them into existence, we become increasingly entrapped in the routine hardening of our

mental arteries. There can be an almost automatic default in the assertion of prejudice as principle, in the rapid assumption of those cynical set-attitudes that the novelist Marilynne Robinson, for example, laments: 'When a good man or woman stumbles, we say "I knew it all along", and when a bad one has a gracious moment, we sneer at the hypocrisy.'[4] No serious reader of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or of Marilynne Robinson's *Home* would automatically think that. There is, similarly, a cautionary occasion in Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days*, when a young white South African woman overhears a neglected member of her liberal group say something unusual which is not immediately acceptable to the party line. He simply suggests that to think everything as due to racial prejudice is itself a prejudice. Jolted, she thinks to herself: 'It was a change of focus of the kind that interested me.'

Novels excel in that sort of sudden shift of point of view. Cut off from such revisionary changes of focus when the habitually general suddenly gives way to the new or reclaimed particular, our thoughts only become fixed habits of mind. We resort to what we *think* we think or what we are tacitly persuaded to sign up to. The literal is not the literary. A reading expert, Keith Oatley, reports that scanners show that once a metaphor becomes clichéd it no longer activates the brain's motor system across domains as it did when new; my own collaborators in cognitive science have demonstrated how a dramatically compressed Shakespearean coinage such as 'this old man godded me' excites the brain in a way that 'this old man deified me' or 'made a god of me' does not.[5] Predictable opinions and conventional formulations merely flat-line, going along the boring old mental pathways they thereby reinforce.

We know so little of what actually happens in the act of serious reading. An early twentieth-century researcher, Edmund Huey, travelled the United States investigating the teaching and practice of reading. 'To completely analyse what we do when we read,' he wrote, 'would almost be the acme of a psychologist's achievements, for it would be to describe very many of the most intricate workings of the human mind, as well as to unravel the tangled story of the most remarkable specific performance that civilization has learned in all its history.'[6] In all its youthful mix of limitations, possibilities, and even fantasies, brain-imaging is no more and no less than one

(currently fashionable) part of a greater aspiration that must do its exploratory work at various levels and by diverse methods. The aspiration is to find what unrecognized or neglected powers the mind employs, what hidden shapes it takes, in the most powerful personal forms of reading, culminating in the experience of poetic thinking.

What follows in this opening chapter, then, speaks on behalf of a language used for something other than the reductive naming of themes or the delimiting of topics; something more than the paraphrases of opinion or the catch-all nouns of explanation or the strict linearity of argument. In literature, by the creation of felt context and underlying situation, thoughts show where they have come from, what they are related to and summoned by. This involves a writer finding a place, a site, for what otherwise might have no obvious place in the conventional epistemological frameworks of the world.

1. What is a holding-ground?

Creating significant space

Though a literary language is not just about the words, let's start with words, and with one word: only it is a missing word, a word that will not come to mind.

William James, philosopher, psychologist, and brother of the novelist Henry James, was interested when he found himself seeking for a missing word that something in his current situation seemed urgently to call for. That in itself is James's first major point: that words are not learnt or sought for their own sake but in the endeavour of *going after* things, in the process of pursuing them and trying to reach them. 'There is a gap therein,' he writes of this experience of blind mental search for meaning, 'but no mere gap':

> It is a gap that is intensely *active*. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed for term.[7]

You try this word and it's a lazy cliché; you try another perhaps more elaborate word but still it doesn't seem to fit or catch that

'wraith', that ghost or spirit of meaning intuited, as it were, at the back of the mind. Perhaps someone you know may helpfully suggest a general term that more or less covers what you seem to intend. But if that isn't what you mean inside, you feel yourself as individual to be normalized and stereotyped, and have almost to look away to keep that missing meaning still in mind. Because in all these efforts—

> if wrong names are proposed to us, this singularly definite gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit into its mould. And the gap of one word does not feel like the gap of another, all empty of content as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps. (PP i. 251)

It is far from comfortable to be stuck in that vacant but resonant space where you do not know, automatically, what is the next thing to say or write or do, only the wrong ones. But even as it jams the normal process of verbalization, this struggle for articulacy points to an unnamed 'something' creatively important within human beings—a compressed sense of meaning that needs language, is thoroughly imbued with linguistic possibilities, but exists ahead of its own formulation in words. James believed that a good third of our psychic life consists in 'these rapid premonitory perspective views of schemes of thought not yet articulate' (PP i. 253). The struggle to find words is a nascent form of poetry, about knowing and yet not-knowing at different levels. In writing, the not-knowing that goes on in front of the eyes, as they fix on the blank of the page, is trying to get in touch with that silently inchoate knowing that exists just behind them. When the knowing and not-knowing meet, it is an event that seems to make existence whole again.

So here, with Gerard Manley Hopkins fighting his own hopelessness:

> NOT, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
> Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
> In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more.* I can;
> Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

The poem is made out of what is almost a stutter of 'not' and 'can'. What is so powerful is the invisible two-way movement in all this: the way in which the poet puts down his monosyllabic starting-points and finds his own words return back upon him as half-thoughts

prompting their further formulation. Thus the opening 'Not' builds into 'I'll not', then 'not feast, not untwist'; while the half-stifled cry 'can no more' is heard and met by the return 'I can'. Then it is 'can—*something*' and '*not* choose *not* to be', the poet using whatever he has already got, however incomplete or negative, for more than he usually can. This is language serving as micro-surgery, doing intricate internal work where the normal thick fingers operate too clumsily. But such language must work on the very verge of the inarticulate when recourse to the refuge of easy names and obvious states (the terrible comfort of 'despair') is all too dangerously tempting.

'Namelessness *is* compatible with existence' (PP i. 251), James concludes magnificently. It means that something inarticulate *is* there demandingly in the gap of a missing meaning, and even in its resistance to make-dos, is looking for a further future existence for itself. That anterior stuff—prior to formulation—is precisely what the act of formulation points to and lives off. Without it, we do not start in the right place but too far on, in educated articulateness where words come easy but cheap.

What searching for the right word creates is, at the least, the sense of significant space, a space which it is necessary to fill in the right way, or the wrong way may lose and destroy it. Then if it works a sentence becomes an achievement—as George Henry Lewes, partner to George Eliot, describes when a writer is on the threshold of articulation:

> The words float suspended, soulless, mere sounds. No sooner are these floating sounds grasped by the copula, than in that grasp they are grouped into significance: they start into life, as a supersaturated saline solution crystallizes on being touched by a needle-point.[8]

The copula is a word that connects subject and predicate—typically 'is'. This is—what? Can—something. Or three words together, suddenly crystallizing into sense: 'wish day come'. In both senses, the words then 'start' into life.

I wish we could hold on to that sense of the start and the point just before it—that invisible generative place, all too soon absorbed again into the language-process in which it can seem only a means to the end called 'communication'. What is important here is something coming into a language that serves as more than a means: it