

Real Voices

On Reading

Edited by
Philip Davis



REAL VOICES

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First published 1997 by

MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London

Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0-333-67002-7 hardcover

ISBN 0-333-67003-5 paperback

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

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd
Chippenham, Wiltshire



Published in the United States of America by
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,
Scholarly and Reference Division
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

ISBN 0-312-16475-0

Also by Philip Davis

MEMORY AND WRITING
THE EXPERIENCE OF READING
IN MIND OF JOHNSON
EXPERIMENTAL ESSAYS ON BERNARD MALAMUD
SUDDEN SHAKESPEARE

For Brian Nellist

'... Visionary power
Attends upon the motions of the winds,
Embodied in the mystery of words:
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things do work their changes there,
As in a mansion like their proper home.
Even forms and substances are circumfused
By that transparent veil with light divine ...'

Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805)
Book V ('Books'), 619–26

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the publishers of parts or earlier versions of the following essays:

George Steiner's 'Critic'/'Reader' was first published in 1979 in *New Literary History*, and reprinted in *George Steiner: a Reader* (Penguin, 1984).

'So Little Do We Know of What Goes On When We Read', by George Craig, is a revised version of 'Reading: Who is Doing What to Whom?' first published in *The Modern English Novel*, edited by Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976).

The essays by Joseph Brodsky reprinted here by permission of his estate are also to appear in his most recent collection, *Grief and Reason* (Penguin).

Parts of 'Trances', by Les Murray, are adapted from 'Embodiment and Incarnation' and 'Poems and Poesies' in *The Paperbark Tree* (London: Minerva, 1993), and the poem 'Life Cycle of Ideas' appeared in *Oxford Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, and is reproduced by permission of the publishers.

An earlier version of 'Poetry's Subject', by Douglas Oliver, appeared in *PN Review*, vol. 105, 1995; it was originally given as the Judith E. Wilson Annual Lecture on Poetry in the University of Cambridge, 1995.

The arguments set out in Raymond Tallis's 'Theorrhoea Contra Realism' have been presented in more detail in *Not Saussure: a Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* 2nd edition (London: Macmillan, 1995), and in *In Defence of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988; 2nd edition London: Furrington, 1995).

'Green Glass Beads' by Doris Lessing appears by kind permission of Jonathan Clowes Ltd.

Notes on the Contributors

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Josie Billington is a Lecturer in English at Chester College of Higher Education. She has recently completed her PhD thesis on Mrs Gaskell and Tolstoy.

Joseph Brodsky, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987, was Poet Laureate of the United States in 1991. Sentenced to hard labour in northern Russia in 1964, he became an involuntary exile in 1972 and was Professor of Literature at Mt Holyoke College from 1981. His most recent volumes of poetry were *To Urania* (1988), *Watermark* (1992) and *Selected Works* (1993). He also published a volume of selected essays, *Less Than One* (1988), and *Marbles*, a play (1990). Joseph Brodsky died in January 1996.

George Craig is Reader in French in the School of European Studies, University of Sussex. He has written on Mallarmé, Proust, Beckett and Duras.

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Gabriel Josipovici was born in France in 1940 of Russo-Italian, Romano-Levantine parents. He lived in Egypt from 1945 to 1956, when he came to this country. He read English at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, graduating in 1961, and since 1963 has been a member of the School of European Studies at the University of Sussex. He is now (part-time) Professor of English there. He has published over a dozen novels and collections of short stories, among which are *Contre-Jour* and *Moo Pak*; half a dozen critical books, among which are *The World and the Book* and *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible*; and numerous plays and radio plays, two of which *AG* and *Mr Vee*, were the BBC entries for the Italia Prize. *Touch: An Essay* appears in 1996, and in the academic year 1996–7 he will be Lord Weidenfeld Professor of Comparative European Literature at Oxford.

Doris Lessing has published 20 novels, including *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1975), the five-novel sequences *Children of Violence* (1952–69) and *Canopus in Argos* (1979–83), *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and *The Fifth Child* (1988). Her latest novel is *Love, Again*. There are ten collections of short stories, the latest of which is *London Observed* (1992), drama and poetry, as well as works of non-fiction including *A Small Personal Voice* (1974), *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* (1986), *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* (1987), *African Laughter* (1992) and the first volume of her autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994).

Les Murray lives on the north coast farm in New South Wales of his childhood. His volumes of poetry include *The Vernacular Republic: Poems 1961–81*, *Poems against Economics* (1976), *The Daylight Moon* (1987), *Dog Fox Field* (1990), *Collected Poems* (1991) and *Translations from the Natural World* (1993). *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980) is a verse novel, while *The Paperbark Tree* (1992) is a volume of selected prose.

Douglas Oliver's most recent book is a long poem-satire on the politics of urban America, *Penniless Politics* (1991; 1994). A selection of poetry and prose, *Three Variations on the Theme of Harm* (1990) includes his satire on modern Britain, *The Infant and the Pearl*. Many of the poems in a just-finished prose/poetry book on Africa, post-GATT, have been appearing in national reviews in Britain, the US and France. His prosodic research is in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (1989). He lives permanently in Paris with his wife, the New York poet Alice Notley.

George Steiner, Extraordinary Fellow, Churchill College, Cambridge since 1969, Weidenfeld Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Oxford 1994–5 and Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of Geneva 1974–94, has published *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1958), *The Death of Tragedy* (1960), *Language and Silence* (1967), *Extraterritorial* (1971), *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), *On Difficulty* (1978), *Antigones* (1984), *Real Presences* (1989), *No Passion Spent* (1996). His fictional writings include *Anno Domini* (1964), *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1981), *Proofs and Three Parables* (1992) and *The Deep of the Sea* (1996).

Raymond Tallis is Professor of Geriatric Medicine at the University of Manchester and a consultant physician in Health Care of the Elderly in Salford. Apart from his medical publications, his published works include *The Explicit Animal* (1991), *The Pursuit of Mind*, co-edited with Howard Robinson (1991), *In Defence of Realism*, (1988), *Not Saussure*, 2nd edn (1995) and *Newton's Sleep, Two Cultures and Two Kingdoms* (1995). *Enemies of Consciousness* appears in 1996. He has published short stories and several volumes of verse, most recently *Fathers and Sons* in 1993.

Introduction: Not on the Run

PHILIP DAVIS

'It saddens me,' complained a recent anonymous contributor to the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 'to see so little principled and vociferous resistance to the theorists on the part of lecturers who have had a more conventional scholarly training. Academics of wide learning and genuine critical insight are on the run.'

It was originally proposed to me, by a colleague, that we should produce a collection of essays which, so far from being on the run, should be seen as *Fighting Back Against Theory*. Indeed, that was to be the working title. This is not that collection.

But not because the lecturer who wrote to the *THES* could be dismissed as pointing to something that was simply not happening. All too anonymous, I am afraid, he or she wrote:

My first and second years learn their lessons early: post-structuralism and radical feminist criticism are what the tutors want and what they will reward. Liberalism and humanism are outmoded, defunct, hopelessly passé and misconceived. So my students produce unintelligible essays crammed with blasé anti-humanist rhetoric, tortuously unconvincing interpretations, and puritanical moralising posing as political insight. Texts are blithely reduced to thinly-veiled expressions of false-consciousness, or routinely shown to subvert their own (lamentably wrong-headed) ideological structures . . .

Lecturers see it as their job to disabuse students of their political misconceptions and bring them into line with their own dogma . . . Students assume they can apply their 'critical concepts' to whatever literary text they are ostensibly discussing. Most importantly, they will have read even less of the literary canon than their forebears, though this will not prevent them from carelessly dismissing whole literary traditions such as the realist novel with one swipe of the pen.

Speaking merely for myself, and whatever may be the exaggerations in the above, I accept the fundamental charge as obvious: that there is less real reading going on now, both inside and outside

universities and, indeed, in our so-called 'culture' as a whole. Less not only in terms of quantity, but in terms of sheer quality of specific, caring attention. It is just such serious mental attention, and not merely the predetermined application of critical concepts, that makes reading what I would call real: meditated, looking out, unmuddled of spirit, alert without cant or fashion, troubled and delighted, open to thought and feeling, to discovery and memory. It is the sort of reading George Steiner and George Craig describe in the opening essays and which, later, Hester Jones and Josie Billington bring to poetry and to the novel.

And yet, with statements like the one from the *THES*, the quarrel between so-called 'traditionalists' and 'theorists' begins all over again on easily predictable lines. The very terms of the opposition create between the two over-emphatically embattled sides the sheer unreality of mutually self-weakening positions. Not to want to be sucked into that ugly and reductive model of controversy is not merely liberal cowardice.

I wanted something both more permanent and less reactive than just 'fighting back'. Consequently I simply wrote to a number of people I respected, asking them to write something which showed – in any way they chose and in mind of any audience that seemed to them reachable – what reading meant to them. I am not saying that my choices were neutral ones – they were in line with the intuitions implicit in my sense of respect. But there was no 'we', no party line, no set vocabulary. I wrote to potential contributors to say that I was looking for them to write essays that offered a personal vision of a human vocation in literature, showing what individuals may stand for as individuals – even if (or precisely because) current thinking often denies the possible existence of any such creature. I wanted people who had in them a *voice*, by means of which to narrow the gap between writers and readers, as well as between readers inside and readers outside the university.

Many of the authors of the essays in this volume are themselves, first and foremost, writers: poets and novelists. And, significantly, most of the academics here, as is shown in the Notes on the Contributors, are also committed to the writing of fiction and poetry in ways that have personal connection with their teaching and their criticism. A great critic, says Wilbur Sanders, thinking in particular of Samuel Johnson, is simply a great writer, thinking about books; and so it is with good critics too:

Criticism is just another variety of literature – literature about books seen as part of a thinking person's life. One is interested in a critic for the same reasons one is interested in a novelist or an essayist – Who is this man? this woman? What do they make of the world? How rich is their experience of it? How deeply pondered are their conclusions?

'Who Owns Literature?', *Universities Quarterly*, vol.40, no.3, p.237.

And: How do they *help* us, in the understanding of the book and of what it represents, in the pursuit of thinking about living?

I went for people who, I believed, had something passionate to say that was real to them. *Pour encourager les autres*. Among the contributors as a whole, I simply trusted that a certain common spirit would emerge, unthreatened by personal and particular differences and even enhanced by them: the common spirit of personal commitment.

The reader will find plenty of different emphases and even disagreements in this collection of essays, containing as it does both young and old, male and female, poets and novelists, right and left, believers and secularists, realists and modernists – the varied and overlapping proportions between them all emerging finally through human circumstance rather than conscious editorial design. But the differences are, I believe, the product of neither the weak liberalism of mere variety nor the abrasive reactivity of crude controversy. Most of the disagreements offer a reader access to the arena of serious thought in which difference of emphasis represents the serious weighing of individual choices. Michael Irwin and Gabriel Josipovici, for example, write very different novels; George Steiner and Raymond Tallis finally think differently about the relation of theory and theology. You may not agree with a particular accent, personal viewpoint or tone of thought, but it should offer you entry into the general realm of consideration which that individual must seek to represent in his or her own particular way.

'The poetic experience', says Les Murray, 'is not of course confined to verse.' And the literary experience is not confined to literature. On the contrary, as Wilbur Sanders, one of my own past teachers, again puts it, with all the directness of freedom:

The quality of human life is more important than what is said about it, and the justification of literature must lie, if anywhere,

in the way it serves that life, not in its own self-enclosed activity. It's the mark of a great writer, often, to see this very starkly – finding the cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces he can so easily conjure up, trifling and ineffectual; feeling that he may as well break his staff and drown his book, for all the difference it makes to the real world. The fictionality of art oppresses him, until writing can come to seem an activity unworthy of a grown man or woman. 'Life is short,' Tolstoy wrote to an importunate publisher in 1859, 'and to waste it in my adult years writing . . . stories . . . makes me feel ashamed.' It's the mainspring of Tolstoy's greatness that he doesn't care about literature. Only by not caring about it was he freed to put into literature the life-content that made it *worth* caring about.'

'Who Owns Literature?', p. 226.

People go to particular books because there are places, or even mere tiny moments, in them which give particular readers an opening onto what seems the very life of life. 'Emotion in ordinary life cannot fuse perfectly with thought,' argues Douglas Oliver in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (Macmillan 1989): conceptualization comes too late, conscious thinking can never get into the speed of the emotional dynamic. But Poetry, in its sheer instants of being, says Oliver, 'discovers a way to unify the time-scales of emotion, concept, and verbal music'. Or again, as Les Murray says of the poetic experience in 'Embodiment and Incarnation' in *The Paperbark Tree*: 'We can have it repeatedly, and each time timelessly, but we can't have it steadily. We are as it were not yet permitted to live there.' The essays in this book at times seem to me to make it possible to live 'there', or to live out of the resonance from there, a little bit more, a little while longer. That is one of the emphatically unironic purposes of thinking and writing about reading.

This book is written in search of all serious readers, inside and outside universities; lecturers, teachers, researchers or undergraduates; writers and would-be writers; readers in tube stations and at home, young and old; graduates who wish they had done more in their undergraduate days or retained links with their interests then; people who have never had or perhaps never wanted the opportunity to study literature formally. The book employs the different voices of its writers in order to find echoes in a wide variety of different readers, however and wherever it can reach them. Raymond Tallis is first of all a medical man. Joseph Brodsky came from

Russia to write in America, Les Murray writes from his farm in Australia, Douglas Oliver out of France. But if indeed amidst all these voices *Real Voices* makes one statement, it is probably this one, from the poem 'The Trances': that the thing still 'goes on'. The real thing, in literature and through literature, goes on – despite the varying obstacles of discouragement, failure, loneliness or unbelief.

Most of the essays in this volume were written for the purpose: where they are not entirely new, they have been revised accordingly. The most lightly revised are the speeches given by Joseph Brodsky, who died as *Real Voices* was going to press. In saddened memory of him too, 'it goes on'.

The editor of *Real Voices: On Reading* can claim no definitive, summarizing or final word as to its contents. One privilege alone I allow myself. In every school, university or organization in general there is, says Doris Lessing, always one person who is *the* one, quietly, implicitly, even secretly – 'the teachers . . . how valuable they are, and how unvalued, except by their pupils who may cherish thoughts of them all their lives.' Gabriel Josipovici writes of Hugo Dyson, and many students will long remember John Bayley. In my own place, in Liverpool, Brian Nellist has been the one, all his teaching life. To him, sheerly as a representative of all the others elsewhere, this book is dedicated.

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Part One

Reading