The J. Hillis Miller Reader

Edited by

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1. Another explicit reference to Ariadne is made later. Maggie, betrayed by her husband, feels herself to be like ‘Ariadne roaming the lone sea-strand’ (24: 307).

2. Both these geometrical figures have one focus at infinity.

How to Read Literature

Teaching How to Read is a Mug’s Game

Telling someone who knows how to read how to read is a mug’s game, as T. S. Eliot said of poetry writing. He presumably meant poetry writing requires a lot of swotting up. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘mug’ is, or was, a slang term at Oxford for a student who studies a lot, a ‘grind.’ ‘To mug’ is ‘to get up (a subject) by hard study.’ Eliot may also have meant that a poet is like a ‘mug’ in the sense of being criminal, another (United States) meaning of the word. He notoriously said meaning in a poem is like the piece of meat the burglar gives to the watchdog so he can get inside the house. Teaching reading is a mug’s game in both senses. You have to know a lot, all about tropes, for example, not to speak of history and literary history. Moreover, what you are teaching is by no means an innocent skill.

Teaching reading also seems unnecessary. If you can read, you can read. Who needs any more help? Just how someone gets from illiteracy to literacy or from basic literacy to being a ‘good reader’ remains something of a mystery. A talent for irony, for example, is a requisite for good reading. Sensitivity to irony seems to be unevenly distributed in the population. A sense for irony is by no means identical to intelligence. You get it or you don’t get it. Dickens in Bleak House in what he says about Jo the crossing sweeper has movingly imagined, for us readers, what it must be like not to be able to read:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and the corner of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language — to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb!

A blindness to irony, even in someone who can ‘read’ perfectly well, is not altogether unlike Jo’s blank incomprehension.

Probably what actually happens within a given person’s mind and feelings when he or she has ‘learned to read,’ and reads a given page, differs more than one might wish, or expect, from person to person. Teachers, those incurable optimists in a discouraging situation, often want to assume that the same thing
happens to all their students when they follow directions to ‘Read Bleak House by next Tuesday,’ or ‘Read the following poems by Yeats for Friday’s class.’ In my experience, dismayingly diverse things happen when students do that. Or, alternatively, one might rejoice at the way students resist being poured into a mold. Getting hard data about what actually happens when students read an ‘assignment’ is not all that easy. It is as hard to ascertain this as it is to learn other important things about the interiority of another person, for example just what he or she means when saying ‘I love you,’ or just how colors look to another person.

Still instructive are the wild divergences and ‘mistreadings’ I. A. Richards found, and reported in Practical Criticism, when he asked students to respond to poems he circulated as ‘hand outs.’ These students were relatively homogeneous Cambridge undergraduates. They had more or less the same class backgrounds and the same earlier educations. Nevertheless, they not only ‘got the poems wrong,’ by most educated people’s standards, misunderstanding them, as well as judging the good ones bad and the bad ones good. They also got the poems wrong in diverse and not easily classifiable ways.

Almost universal literacy has been a major component of print culture and the concomitant rise of the democratic nation-state. As Patricia Crain has shown in The Story of A, teaching the alphabet to children through ‘alphabet books’ was, within print culture, a major way of indoctrinating them into the reigning ideologies of an increasingly capitalist and consumerist culture. ‘A is for Apple Pie,’ for example, invites the child to think of learning the alphabet as connected to eating, and what could be more American than apple pie? After the child learns to read, children’s books, for example The Swiss Family Robinson, then continue the work of making children model citizens. Nowadays, literacy is perhaps less and less necessary for that work. Television and cinema do the same job of interpellation by way of visual and aural images. The children’s television show Sesame Street teaches the alphabet and phonics. Its real teaching power, however, is in the skits and puppet shows that powerfully indoctrinate even those who cannot read. That is not necessarily a bad thing. It seems a feature of language possession that human beings should join together in ‘communities’ of people who see and judge things in similar ways, though no conceivable society is without its prejudices and injustices. That is one reason why democracy is always ‘to come.’ It is a far-off horizon of justice toward which all should work.

Well, then, assuming one still wants to read literature, how should one do it? I make two contradictory and not easily reconcilable prescriptions. I call these, taken together, the aporia of reading.

Reading as Schwärmerei

If it is really the case, as I have argued, that each literary work opens up a singular world, attainable in no other way than by reading that work, then reading should be a matter of giving one’s whole mind, heart, feelings, and imagination, without reservation, to recreating that world within oneself, on the basis of the words. This would be a species of that fanaticism, or rapture, or even revelry that Immanuel Kant calls ‘Schwärmerei.’ The work comes alive as a kind of internal theater that seems in a strange way independent of the words on the page. That was what happened to me when I first read The Swiss Family Robinson. The ability to do that is probably more or less universal, once you have learned to read, once you have learned, that is, to turn those mute and objectively meaningless shapes into letters, words, and sentences that correspond to spoken language.

I suspect that my interior theater or revelry is not by any means the same as another person’s. Even so, each reader’s imaginary world, generated by a given work, seems to that reader to have unquestionable authority. One empirical test of this is the reaction many people have when they see a film made from a novel they have read: ‘No, No! It’s not at all like that! They’ve got it all wrong.’

The illustrations, particularly of children’s books, play an important role in shaping that imaginary theater. The original Sir John Tenniel (1820–1914) illustrations for the Alice books told me how to imagine Alice, the White Rabbit, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and the rest. Still, my imaginary world behind the looking-glass exceeded even the Tenniel pictures. Henry James, in A Small Boy and Others, paid homage to the power of George Cruikshank’s (1792–1878) illustrations for Oliver Twist to determine the way that imaginary world seemed to him:

It perhaps even seemed to me more Cruikshank’s than Dickens’s, it was a thing of such vividly terrible images, and all marked with that peculiarity of Cruikshank that the offered flowers or goodesses, the scenes and figures intended to comfort and cheer, present themselves under his hand as but more subtly sinister, or more suggestively queer, than the frank badnesses and horrors.

What reader, who has happened to see them, to give two other examples, has not had his or her imagination shaped by the wonderful photographs by Coburn that are used as frontispieces for the New York Edition of James’s works or by the frontispiece photographs for the Wessex or Anniversary Editions of Thomas Hardy’s work?

I am advocating, as the first side of the aporia of reading, an innocent, childlike abandonment to the act of reading, without suspicion, reservation, or interrogation. Such a reading makes a willing suspension of disbelief, in
Coleridge's famous phrase. It is a suspension, however, that does not even
know anymore that disbelief might be possible. The suspension then
becomes no longer the result of a conscious effort of will. It becomes
spontaneous, without forethought. My analogy with reciprocal assertions of
'I love you' by two persons is more than casual. As Michel Deguy says, 'La
poésie comme l'amour risque tout sur des signes. (Poetry, like love, risks
everything on signs.)' The relation between reader and story read is like a
love affair. In both cases, it is a matter of giving yourself without reservation
to the other. A book in my hands or on the shelf utters a powerful
command: 'Read me!' To do so is as risky, precarious, or even dangerous
as to respond to another person's 'I love you' with an 'I love you too.' You
never know where saying that might lead you, just as you never know
where reading a given book might lead you. In my own case, reading certain
books has been decisive for my life. Each such book has been a turning
point, the marker of a new epoch.

Reading, like being in love, is by no means a passive act. It takes much
mental, emotional, and even physical energy. Reading requires a positive effort.
One must give all one's faculties to re-creating the work's imaginary world as
fully and as vividly as possible within oneself. One must give all one's faculties to re-creating the work's imaginary world as
fully and as vividly as possible within oneself. For those who are no longer
children, or childlike, a different kind of effort is necessary too. This is the
attempt, an attempt that may well not succeed, to suspend ingrained habits of
'critical' or suspicious reading.

If this double effort, a positive one and a negative one, is not successful, it is
not even possible to know what might be dangerous about submission to the
magic power of the words on the page. In a similar way, you can hardly hear a
piece of music as music if all your attention is taken up in identifying technical
details of the score or in thinking about echoes of earlier music. You must
become as a little child if you are to read literature rightly.

A certain speed in reading is necessary to accomplish this actualization, just as
is the case with music. If you linger too long over the words, they lose their
power as windows on the hitherto unknown. If you play a Mozart piano sonata
or one of Bach's Goldberg Variations too slowly it does not sound like music.
A proper tempo is required. The same thing is true for reading considered as the
generation of a virtual reality. One must read rapidly, allegro, in a dance of
the eyes across the page.

Not all readers are able to read all literary works in this way. I much prefer
Emily Brontë's (1818–48) Wuthering Heights to Charlotte Brontë's (1816–55)
Jane Eyre. I feel I ought to admire the latter more than I do, since so many good
readers like it. Jane Eyre seems to me a sentimental wish-fulfillment, in its grand
climax of Jane's marriage to a blinded and maimed Rochester, symbolically
castrated: 'Reader, I married him.' I have the same resistance to D. H. Lawrence
(1885–1930). The climactic scene in Women in Love, in which Ursula and Birkin
finally make love, seems to me laughable, not in itself, but in Lawrence's

overblown language for it: 'She had her desire fulfilled. He had his desire
fulfilled. For she was to him what he was to her, the immemorial magnificence
of mystic, palpable, real otherness.' Wow! This seems to me simply silly. Seeing
something as silly deprives it of the power to open a new world. It becomes dead
letters on the page. Other readers will have other candidates. I find Anthony
Trollope's novels consistently enchanting, both in their recreation of Victorian
middle-class ideology and in their implicit critique of that ideology. I know
someone who finds Trollope's work annoying in what she sees as its false
presentation of female psychology.

Good Reading is Slow Reading

Good reading, however, also demands slow reading, not just the dancing allegro.
A good reader is someone on whom nothing in a text is lost, as James said a good
writer is in relation to life. 'Try to be one of those on whom nothing is lost.'
That means just the opposite of a willing suspension of disbelief that no longer
even remembers the disbelief that was willingly suspended. It means the reading
lento that Friedrich Nietzsche advocates. Such a reader pauses over every key
word or phrase, looking circumspectly before and after, walking rather than
dancing, anxious not to let the text put anything over on him or her. 'When I
picture to myself a perfect reader,' says Nietzsche, 'I always picture a monster of
courage and curiosity, also something supple, cunning, cautious, a born
adventurer and discoverer.' Slow reading, critical reading, means being suspicious
at every turn, interrogating every detail of the work, trying to figure out
by just what means the magic is wrought. This means attending not to the new
world that is opened up by the work, but to the means by which that opening is
brought about. The difference between the two ways of reading might be
compared to the difference between being taken in by the dazzling show of the
wizard in The Wizard of Oz and, on the contrary, seeing the shabby showman
behind the facade, pulling levers and operating the machinery, creating a
factitious illusion.

This demystification has taken two forms throughout our tangled tradition.
These two forms are still dominant today. One is what might be called
'rhetorical reading.' Such reading means a close attention to the linguistic
devices by which the magic is wrought: observations of how figurative
language is used, of shifts in point of view, of that all-important irony. Irony
is present, for example, in discrepancies between what the narrator in a novel
knows and what the narrator solemnly reports the characters as knowing,
thinking, and feeling. A rhetorical reader is adept in all the habits of 'close
reading.'

The other form of critical reading is interrogation of the way a literary work

...
inculcates beliefs about class, race, or gender relations. These are seen as modes of vision, judgement, and action presented as objectively true but actually ideological. They are linguistic fictions masking as referential verities. This mode of demystification goes these days by the name of ‘cultural studies’ or, sometimes, of ‘postcolonial studies.’

Literary works, it should be remembered, have always had a powerful critical function. They challenge hegemonic ideologies, as well as reinforcing them. Literature in the modern Western sense, as a concomitant of print culture, has taken full advantage of the right to free speech. Proust’s depiction of Marcel’s infatuation with Albertine in *À la recherche du temps perdu* presents his mystification so powerfully that the reader shares in it. The reader finds the imaginary Albertine irresistibly attractive, charming liar though she is. Proust also remorselessly deconstructs that infatuation. He shows it to be based on misreadings, illusions. Cultural criticism continues and makes more obvious a critical penchant of literature itself within Western print culture. Nevertheless, both these forms of critique—rhetorical reading and cultural criticism—have as one of their effects depriving literary works, for given readers, of the sovereign power they have when they are read *allegro*.

The Aporia of Reading

The two ways of reading I am advocating, the innocent way and the demystified way, go counter to one another. Each prevents the other from working—hence the aporia of reading. Combining these two modes of reading in one act of reading is difficult, perhaps impossible, since each inhibits and forbids the other. How can you give yourself wholeheartedly to a literary work, let the work do its work, and at the same time distance yourself from it, regard it with suspicion, and take it apart to see what makes it tick? How can one read *allegro* and at the same time *lento*, combining the two tempos in an impossible dance of reading that is fast and slow at once?

Why, in any case, would anyone want to deprive literature of its amazing power to open alternative worlds, innumerable virtual realities? It seems like a nasty and destructive thing to do. This chapter you are now reading, alas, is an exemplification of this destructiveness. Even in its celebration of literature’s magic, it suspends that magic by bringing it into the open.

Two motives may be identified for this effort of demystification. One is the way literary study was a displacement of a vocation for science. I shifted from physics to literature in the middle of my undergraduate study. My motive was a quasi-scientific curiosity about what seemed to me at that point (and still does) the radical strangeness of literary works, their difference from one another and from ordinary everyday uses of language. What in the world, I asked myself, could have led Tennyson, presumably a sane man, to use language in such an exceedingly peculiar way? Why did he do that? What conceivable use did such language use have when it was written, or could it have today? I wanted, and still want, to account for literature in the same way as physicists want to account for anomalous ‘signals’ coming from around a black hole or from a quasar. I am still trying, and still puzzled.

The other motive is apotropaic. This is a noble or ignoble motive, depending on how you look at it. People have a healthy fear of the power literary works have to instill what may be dangerous or unjust assumptions about race, gender, or class. Both cultural studies and rhetorical reading, the latter especially in its ‘deconstructive’ mode, have this hygienic or defensive purpose. By the time a rhetorical reading, or a ‘slow reading,’ has shown the mechanism by which literary magic works, that magic no longer works. It is seen as a kind of hocus-pocus. By the time a feminist reading of *Paradise Lost* has been performed. Milton’s sexist assumptions (‘Hee for God only, shee for God in him’) have been shown for what they are. The poem, however, has also lost its marvelous ability to present to the reader an imaginary Eden inhabited by two beautiful and eroticized people: ‘So hand in hand they passed, the lovliest pair / That ever since in loves embraces met.’ The demystified reader may also have been reminded by the implacable critic that this Edenic vision is presented through the eyes of a resentful and envious witness, Satan. ‘0 Hell!,’ says Satan, ‘what doth mine eyes with grief behold.’

Milton’s Satan might be called the prototypical demystifier, or suspicious reader, the critic as sceptic or disbeliever. Or the prototype of the modern critical reader might be Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was trained as a professor of ancient rhetoric. His *The Genealogy of Morals*, along with much other writing by him, is a work of cultural criticism before the fact. In a famous statement in ‘On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,’ Nietzsche defines truth, ‘veritas,’ not as a statement or representation of things as they are, but as a tropological fabrication, in short, as literature. ‘Truth,’ says Nietzsche, ‘is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms.’ The reader will note that Nietzsche sees cultural forms, including literature, as warlike, aggressive, a ‘mobile army’ that must be resisted by equally warlike weapons wielded by the critic. The reader will also note that Nietzsche gives an example of this by using an anthropomorphism of his own in calling truth a mobile army. He turns truth’s own weapon against itself.

No doubt about it, these two forms of critical reading, theoretical reading
It is no accident that the notion of ending in narrative is difficult to pin down, whether 'theoretically,' or for a given novel, or for the novels of a given period. The notion of ending in narrative is inherently 'undecidable.'

The impasses of closure in narrative are present already in the terms most commonly used to describe endings. An example is the tradition, going all the way back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, of the use of the image of the knotted and unknotted thread to describe the narrative line. 'To every tragedy,' says Aristotle, 'there pertain (1) a Complication and (2) an Unravelling, or Denouement. The incidents lying outside of the drama proper, and often certain of the incidents within it, form the Complication; the rest of the play constitutes the Denouement' (1947, 58-9). Where does the complication, folding up, or tying together end and the untying start? Aristotle suggests the possibility of a narrative which would be all unraveling or denouement, in which the 'turning-point' from tying to untying would be the beginning of the narrative proper and all the complication would lie prior to the action as its presupposition. 'More specifically,' he says, 'by Complication is meant everything from the beginning of the story up to the critical point, the last in a series of incidents, out of which comes the change of fortune; by Denouement, everything from the beginning of the change of fortune to the end of the play. In the *Lycus* of Theodectes, for example, the Complication embraces the incidents anterior to the drama proper, the seizure of the child Abas, and then the seizure of the parents: the Denouement extends from the indictment for murder to the end' (1947, 59). By a strange but entirely necessary paradox, the problem of the ending here becomes displaced to the problem of the beginning. The whole drama is ending and beginning at once, a beginning ending which must always presuppose something outside of itself, something anterior or ulterior, in order either to begin or to end, in order to begin ending. The moment of reversal, when tying becomes untying, can never be shown as such or identified as such because the two motions are inextricably the same, as in the double antithetical word 'articulate,' which means simultaneously putting together and taking apart. The tying/untying, the turning point, is diffused throughout the whole action. Any point the spectator focuses on is a turning which both ties and unties. This is another way of saying that no narrative can show either its beginning or its ending. It always begins and ends still in medias res, presupposing as a future anterior some part of itself outside itself.