HOW SHOULD ONE READ A BOOK?

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This year, Yale University celebrates the three hundredth anniversary of its founding. Since 1819, The Yale Review *has been a crucial part of the university's intellectual ambitions and cultural heritage. To help take note of Yale's traditional encouragement of the international exchange of ideas, we plan to reprint over the course of this year's issues several essays that originally appeared in these pages. The first are by Virginia Woolf and André Gide.*

Virginia Woolf wrote "How Should One Read a Book?" in January 1926, to deliver as a lecture at a private girls' school in Kent. In revised form, it appeared in The Yale Review *in October of that year and was subsequently collected by Woolf in* The Common Reader: Second Series *(1932). She later published seven other essays in* The Yale Review, *including "Letter to a Young Poet" and "The Novels of Turgenev." Her last contribution, "Two Antiquaries," appeared in March 1939. In 1926,* The Yale Review *also published work by Edith Wharton and Robert Frost, and in the same issue with Woolf's essay were pieces by such different writers as Don Marquis and*

Julian Huxley, Stark Young and Harley Granville-Barker. But then, Woolf's meditation is in itself a civilized abundance.

At this late hour of the world's history, books are to be found in almost every room of the house – in the nursery, in the drawing room, in the dining room, in the kitchen. But in some houses they have become such a company that they have to be accommodated with a room of their own – a reading room, a library, a study. Let us imagine that we are now in such a room; that it is a sunny room, with windows opening on a garden, so that we can hear the trees rustling, the gardener talking, the donkey braying, the old women gossiping at the pump – and all the ordinary processes of life pursuing the casual irregular way which they have pursued these many hundreds of years. As casually, as persistently, books have been coming together on the shelves. Novels, poems, histories, memoirs, dictionaries, maps, directories; black letter books and brand new books; books in French and Greek and Latin; of all shapes and sizes and values, bought for purposes of research, bought to amuse a railway journey, bought by miscellaneous beings, of one temperament and another, serious and frivolous, men of action and men of letters.

Now, one may well ask oneself, strolling into such a room as this, how am I to read these books? What is the right way to set about it? They are so many and so various. My appetite is so fitful and so capricious. What am I to do to get the utmost possible pleasure out of them? And is it pleasure, or profit, or what is it that I should seek? I will lay before you some of the thoughts that have come to me on such an occasion as this. But you will notice the note of interrogation at the end of my title. One may think about reading as much as one chooses, but no one is going to lay down laws about it. Here in this room, if nowhere else, we breathe the air of freedom. Here simple and learned, man and woman are alike. For though reading seems so simple – a mere matter of knowing the alphabet – it is indeed so difficult that it is doubtful whether anybody knows anything about it. Paris is the capital of France; King John signed the Magna Charta; those are facts; those can be taught; but how are we to teach people so to read "Paradise Lost" as to see that it is a great poem, or "Tess of the D'Urber-

villes" so as to see that it is a good novel? How are we to learn the art of reading for ourselves? Without attempting to lay down laws upon a subject that has not been legalized, I will make a few suggestions, which may serve to show you how not to read, or to stimulate you to think out better methods of your own.

And directly we begin to ask how should one read a book we are faced by the fact that books differ; there are poems, novels, biographies on the book shelf there; each differs from the other as a tiger differs from a tortoise, a tortoise from an elephant. Our attitude must always be changing, it is clear. From different books we must ask different qualities. Simple as this sounds, people are always behaving as if all books were of the same species – as if there were only tortoises or nothing but tigers. It makes them furious to find a novelist bringing Queen Victoria to the throne six months before her time; they will praise a poet enthusiastically for teaching them that a violet has four petals and a daisy almost invariably ten. You will save a great deal of time and temper better kept for worthier objects if you will try to make out before you begin to read what qualities you expect of a novelist, what of a poet, what of a biographer. The tortoise is bald and shiny; the tiger has a thick coat of yellow fur. So books too differ: one has its fur, the other has its baldness.

Yes; but for all that the problem is not so simple in a library as at the Zoölogical Gardens. Books have a great deal in common; they are always overflowing their boundaries; they are always breeding new species from unexpected matches among themselves. It is difficult to know how to approach them, to which species each belongs. But if we remember, as we turn to the bookcase, that each of these books was written by a pen which, consciously or unconsciously, tried to trace out a design, avoiding this, accepting that, adventuring the other; if we try to follow the writer in his experiment from the first word to the last, without imposing our design upon him, then we shall have a good chance of getting hold of the right end of the string.

To read a book well, one should read it as if one were writing it. Begin not by sitting on the bench among the judges but by standing in the dock with the criminal. Be his fellow worker, become his accomplice. Even, if you wish merely to read books, begin by writing them. For this certainly is true – one cannot write the

most ordinary little story, attempt to describe the simplest event – meeting a beggar, shall we say, in the street, without coming up against difficulties that the greatest of novelists have had to face. In order that we may realize, however briefly and crudely, the main divisions into which novelists group themselves, let us imagine how differently Defoe, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy would describe the same incident – this meeting a beggar in the street. Defoe is a master of narrative. His prime effort will be to reduce the beggar's story to perfect order and simplicity. This happened first, that next, the other thing third. He will put in nothing, however attractive, that will tire the reader unnecessarily, or divert his attention from what he wishes him to know. He will also make us believe, since he is a master, not of romance or of comedy, but of narrative, that everything that happened is true. He will be extremely precise therefore. This happened, as he tells us on the first pages of "Robinson Crusoe," on the first of September. More subtly and artfully, he will hypnotize us into a state of belief by dropping out casually some little unnecessary fact – for instance, "my father called me one morning into his chamber, where he was confined by the gout." His father's gout is not necessary to the story, but it is necessary to the truth of the story, for it is thus that anybody who is speaking the truth adds some small irrelevant detail without thinking. Further, he will choose a type of sentence which is flowing but not too full, exact but not epigrammatic. His aim will be to present the thing itself without distortion from his own angle of vision. He will meet the subject face to face, foursquare, without turning aside for a moment to point out that this was tragic, or that beautiful; and his aim is perfectly achieved.

But let us not for a moment confuse it with Jane Austen's aim. Had she met a beggar woman, no doubt she would have been interested in the beggar's story. But she would have seen at once that for her purposes the whole incident must be transformed. Streets and the open air and adventures mean nothing to her, artistically. It is character that interests her. She would at once make the beggar into a comfortable elderly man of the upper middle classes, seated by his fireside at his ease. Then, instead of plunging into the story vigorously and veraciously, she will write a few paragraphs of accurate and artfully seasoned introduction, summing up the circumstances and sketching the character of the

gentleman she wishes us to know. "Matrimony as the origin of change was always disagreeable" to Mr. Woodhouse, she says. Almost immediately, she thinks it well to let us see that her words are corroborated by Mr. Woodhouse himself. We hear him talking. "Poor Miss Taylor! – I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her." And when Mr. Woodhouse has talked enough to reveal himself from the inside, she then thinks it time to let us see him through his daughter's eyes. "You got Hannah that good place. Nobody thought of Hannah till you mentioned her." Thus she shows us Emma flattering him and humoring him. Finally then, we have Mr. Woodhouse's character seen from three different points of view at once; as he sees himself; as his daughter sees him; and as he is seen by the marvellous eye of that invisible lady Jane Austen herself. All three meet in one, and thus we can pass round her characters free, apparently, from any guidance but our own.

Now let Thomas Hardy choose the same theme – a beggar met in the street – and at once two great changes will be visible. The street will be transformed into a vast and sombre heath; the man or woman will take on some of the size and indistinctness of a statue. Further, the relations of this human being will not be towards other people, but towards the heath, towards man as lawgiver, towards those powers which are in control of man's destiny. Once more our perspective will be completely changed. All the qualities which were admirable in "Robinson Crusoe," admirable in "Emma," will be neglected or absent. The direct literal statement of Defoe is gone. There is none of the clear, exact brilliance of Jane Austen. Indeed, if we come to Hardy from one of these great writers we shall exclaim at first that he is "melodramatic" or "unreal" compared with them. But we should bethink us that there are at least two sides to the human soul; the light side and the dark side. In company, the light side of the mind is exposed; in solitude, the dark. Both are equally real, equally important. But a novelist will always tend to expose one rather than the other; and Hardy, who is a novelist of the dark side, will contrive that no clear, steady light falls upon his people's faces, that they are not closely observed in drawing rooms, that they come in contact with moors, sheep, the sky and the stars, and in their solitude are directly at the mercy of the gods. If Jane Austen's characters are real in

the drawing room, they would not exist at all upon the top of Stonehenge. Feeble and clumsy in drawing rooms, Hardy's people are large-limbed and vigorous out of doors. To achieve his purpose Hardy is neither literal and four-square like Defoe, nor deft and pointed like Jane Austen. He is cumbrous, involved, metaphorical. Where Jane Austen describes manners, he describes nature. Where she is matter of fact, he is romantic and poetical. As both are great artists, each is careful to observe the laws of his own perspective, and will not be found confusing us (as so many lesser writers do) by introducing two different kinds of reality into the same book.

Yet it is very difficult not to wish them less scrupulous. Frequent are the complaints that Jane Austen is too prosaic, Thomas Hardy too melodramatic. And we have to remind ourselves that it is necessary to approach every writer differently in order to get from him all he can give us. We have to remember that it is one of the qualities of greatness that it brings heaven and earth and human nature into conformity with its own vision. It is by reason of this masterliness of theirs, this uncompromising idiosyncrasy, that great writers often require us to make heroic efforts in order to read them rightly. They bend us and break us. To go from Jane Austen to Hardy, from Peacock to Trollope, from Scott to Meredith, from Richardson to Kipling, is to be wrenched and distorted, thrown this way and then that. Besides, everyone is born with a natural bias of his own in one direction rather than in another. He instinctively accepts Hardy's vision rather than Jane Austen's, and, reading with the current and not against it, is carried on easily and swiftly by the impetus of his own bent to the heart of his author's genius. But then Jane Austen is repulsive to him. He can scarcely stagger through the desert of her novels.

Sometimes this natural antagonism is too great to be overcome, but trial is always worth making. For these difficult and inaccessible books, with all their preliminary harshness, often yield the richest fruits in the end, and so curiously is the brain compounded that while tracts of literature repel at one season, they are appetizing and essential at another.

If, then, this is true – that books are of very different types, and that to read them rightly we have to bend our imaginations powerfully, first one way, then another – it is clear that reading is one of

the most arduous and exhausting of occupations. Often the pages fly before us and we seem, so keen is our interest, to be living and not even holding the volume in our hands. But the more exciting the book, the more danger we run of over-reading. The symptoms are familiar. Suddenly the book becomes dull as ditchwater and heavy as lead. We yawn and stretch and cannot attend. The highest flights of Shakespeare and Milton become intolerable. And we say to ourselves – is Keats a fool or am I? – a painful question, a question, moreover, that need not be asked if we realized how great a part the art of not reading plays in the art of reading. To be able to read books without reading them, to skip and saunter, to suspend judgment, to lounge and loaf down the alleys and bye-streets of letters is the best way of rejuvenating one's own creative power. All biographies and memoirs, all the hybrid books which are largely made up of facts, serve to restore to us the power of reading real books – that is to say, works of pure imagination. That they serve also to impart knowledge and to improve the mind is true and important, but if we are considering how to read books for pleasure, not how to provide an adequate pension for one's widow, this other property of theirs is even more valuable and important. But here again one should know what one is after. One is after rest, and fun, and oddity, and some stimulus to one's own jaded creative power. One has left one's bare and angular tower and is strolling along the street looking in at the open windows. After solitude and concentration, the open air, the sight of other people absorbed in innumerable activities, comes upon us with an indescribable fascination.

The windows of the houses are open; the blinds are drawn up. One can see the whole household without their knowing that they are being seen. One can see them sitting round the dinner table, talking, reading, playing games. Sometimes they seem to be quarrelling – but what about? Or they are laughing – but what is the joke? Down in the basement the cook is reading a newspaper aloud, while the housemaid is making a piece of toast; in comes the kitchen maid and they all start talking at the same moment – but what are they saying? Upstairs a girl is dressing to go to a party. But where is she going? There is an old lady sitting at her bedroom window with some kind of wool work in her hand and a fine green parrot in a cage beside her. And what is she thinking?

All this life has somehow come together; there is a reason for it; a coherency in it, could one but seize it. The biographer answers the innumerable questions which we ask as we stand outside on the pavement looking in at the open window. Indeed there is nothing more interesting than to pick one's way about among these vast depositories of facts, to make up the lives of men and women, to create their complex minds and households from the extraordinary abundance and litter and confusion of matter which lies strewn about. A thimble, a skull, a pair of scissors, a sheaf of sonnets, are given us, and we have to create, to combine, to put these incongruous things together. There is, too, a quality in facts, an emotion which comes from knowing that men and women actually did and suffered these things, which only the greatest novelists can surpass. Captain Scott, starving and freezing to death in the snow, affects us as deeply as any made-up story of adventure by Conrad or Defoe; but it affects us differently. The biography differs from the novel. To ask a biographer to give us the same kind of pleasure that we get from a novelist is to misuse and misread him. Directly he says "John Jones was born at five-thirty in the morning of August 13, 1862," he has committed himself, focussed his lens upon fact, and if he then begins to romance, the perspective becomes blurred, we grow suspicious, and our faith in his integrity as a writer is destroyed. In the same way fact destroys fiction. If Thackeray, for example, had quoted an actual newspaper account of the Battle of Waterloo in "Vanity Fair," the whole fabric of his story would have been destroyed, as a stone destroys a bubble.

But it is undoubted that these hybrid books, these warehouses and depositories of facts, play a great part in resting the brain and restoring its zest of imagination. The work of building up a life for oneself from skulls, thimbles, scissors, and sonnets stimulates our interest in creation and rouses our wish to see the work beautifully and powerfully done by a Flaubert or a Tolstoi. Moreover, however interesting facts may be, they are an inferior form of fiction, and gradually we become impatient of their weakness and diffuseness, of their compromises and evasions, of the slovenly sentences which they make for themselves, and are eager to revive ourselves with the greater intensity and truth of fiction.

It is necessary to have in hand an immense reserve of imagina-

tive energy in order to attack the steeps of poetry. Here are none of those gradual introductions, those resemblances to the familiar world of daily life with which the novelist entices us into his world of imagination. All is violent, opposite, unrelated. But various causes, such as bad books, the worry of carrying on life efficiently, the intermittent but powerful shocks dealt us by beauty, and the incalculable impulses of our own minds and bodies frequently put us into that state of mind in which poetry is a necessity. The sight of a crocus in a garden will suddenly bring to mind all the spring days that have ever been. One then desires the general, not the particular; the whole, not the detail; to turn uppermost the dark side of the mind; to be in contact with silence, solitude, and all men and women and not this particular Richard, or that particular Anne. Metaphors are then more expressive than plain statements.

Thus in order to read poetry rightly, one must be in a rash, an extreme, a generous state of mind in which many of the supports and comforts of literature are done without. Its power of make-believe, its representative power, is dispensed with in favor of its extremities and extravagances. The representation is often at a very far remove from the thing represented, so that we have to use all our energies of mind to grasp the relation between, for example, the song of a nightingale and the images and ideas which that song stirs in the mind. Thus reading poetry often seems a state of rhapsody in which rhyme and metre and sound stir the mind as wine and dance stir the body, and we read on, understanding with the senses, not with the intellect, in a state of intoxication. Yet all this intoxication and intensity of delight depend upon the exactitude and truth of the image, on its being the counterpart of the reality within. Remote and extravagant as some of Shakespeare's images seem, far-fetched and ethereal as some of Keats's, at the moment of reading they seem the cap and culmination of the thought; its final expression. But it is useless to labor the matter in cold blood. Anyone who has read a poem with pleasure will remember the sudden conviction, the sudden recollection (for it seems sometimes as if we were about to say, or had in some previous existence already said, what Shakespeare is actually now saying), which accompany the reading of poetry, and give it its exaltation and intensity. But such reading is attended, whether consciously or unconsciously, with the utmost stretch and vigilance

of the faculties, of the reason no less than of the imagination. We are always verifying the poet's statements, making a flying comparison, to the best of our powers, between the beauty he makes outside and the beauty we are aware of within. For the humblest among us is endowed with the power of comparison. The simplest (provided he loves reading) has that already within him to which he makes what is given him – by poet or novelist – correspond.

With that saying, of course, the cat is out of the bag. For this admission that we can compare, discriminate, brings us to this further point. Reading is not merely sympathizing and understanding; it is also criticizing and judging. Hitherto our endeavor has been to read books as a writer writes them. We have been trying to understand, to appreciate, to interpret, to sympathize. But now, when the book is finished, the reader must leave the dock and mount the bench. He must cease to be the friend; he must become the judge. And this is no mere figure of speech. The mind seems ("seems," for all is obscure that takes place in the mind) to go through two processes in reading. One might be called the actual reading; the other the after reading. During the actual reading, when we hold the book in our hands, there are incessant distractions and interruptions. New impressions are always completing or cancelling the old. One's judgment is suspended, for one does not know what is coming next. Surprise, admiration, boredom, interest, succeed each other in such quick succession that when, at last, the end is reached, one is for the most part in a state of complete bewilderment. Is it good? or bad? What kind of book is it? How good a book is it? The friction of reading and the emotion of reading beat up too much dust to let us find clear answers to these questions. If we are asked our opinion, we cannot give it. Parts of the book seem to have sunk away, others to be starting out in undue prominence. Then perhaps it is better to take up some different pursuit – to walk, to talk, to dig, to listen to music. The book upon which we have spent so much time and thought fades entirely out of sight. But suddenly, as one is picking a snail from a rose, tying a shoe, perhaps, doing something distant and different, the whole book floats to the top of the mind complete. Some process seems to have been finished without one's being aware of it. The different details which have accumulated in reading assemble themselves in their proper places. The book takes on a

definite shape; it becomes a castle, a cowshed, a gothic ruin, as the case may be. Now one can think of the book as a whole, and the book as a whole is different, and gives one a different emotion, from the book received currently in several different parts. Its symmetry and proportion, its confusion and distortion can cause great delight or great disgust apart from the pleasure given by each detail as it is separately realized. Holding this complete shape in mind it now becomes necessary to arrive at some opinion of the book's merits, for though it is possible to receive the greatest pleasure and excitement from the first process, the actual reading, though this is of the utmost importance, it is not so profound or so lasting as the pleasure we get when the second process – the after reading – is finished, and we hold the book clear, secure, and (to the best of our powers) complete in our minds.

But how, we may ask, are we to decide any of these questions – is it good, or is it bad? – how good is it, how bad is it? Not much help can be looked for from outside. Critics abound; criticisms pullulate; but minds differ too much to admit of close correspondence in matters of detail, and nothing is more disastrous than to crush one's own foot into another person's shoe. When we want to decide a particular case, we can best help ourselves, not by reading criticism, but by realizing our own impression as acutely as possible and referring this to the judgments which we have gradually formulated in the past. There they hang in the wardrobe of our mind – the shapes of the books we have read, as we hung them up and put them away when we had done with them. If we have just read "Clarissa Harlowe," for example, let us see how it shows up against the shape of "Anna Karenina." At once the outlines of the two books are cut out against each other as a house with its chimneys bristling and its gables sloping is cut out against a harvest moon. At once Richardson's qualities – his verbosity, his obliqueness – are contrasted with Tolstoi's brevity and directness. And what is the reason of this difference in their approach? And how does our emotion at different crises of the two books compare? And what must we attribute to the eighteenth century, and what to Russia and the translator? But the questions which suggest themselves are innumerable. They ramify infinitely, and many of them are apparently irrelevant. Yet it is by asking them and pursuing the answers as far as we can go that we arrive at our standard

of values, and decide in the end that the book we have just read is of this kind or of that, has merit in that degree or in this. And it is now, when we have kept closely to our own impression, formulated independently our own judgment, that we can most profitably help ourselves to the judgments of the great critics – Dryden, Johnson, and the rest. It is when we can best defend our own opinions that we get most from theirs.

So, then – to sum up the different points we have reached in this essay – have we found any answer to our question, how should we read a book? Clearly, no answer that will do for everyone; but perhaps a few suggestions. In the first place, a good reader will give the writer the benefit of every doubt; the help of all his imagination; will follow as closely, interpret as intelligently as he can. In the next place, he will judge with the utmost severity. Every book, he will remember, has the right to be judged by the best of its kind. He will be adventurous, broad in his choice, true to his own instincts, yet ready to consider those of other people. This is an outline which can be filled in at taste and at leisure, but to read something after this fashion is to be a reader whom writers respect. It is by the means of such readers that masterpieces are helped into the world.

If the moralists ask us how we can justify our love of reading, we can make use of some such excuse as this. But if we are honest, we know that no such excuse is needed. It is true that we get nothing whatsoever except pleasure from reading; it is true that the wisest of us is unable to say what that pleasure may be. But that pleasure – mysterious, unknown, useless as it is – is enough. That pleasure is so curious, so complex, so immensely fertilizing to the mind of anyone who enjoys it, and so wide in its effects, that it would not be in the least surprising to discover, on the day of judgment when secrets are revealed and the obscure is made plain, that the reason why we have grown from pigs to men and women, and come out from our caves, and dropped our bows and arrows, and sat round the fire and talked and drunk and made merry and given to the poor and helped the sick and made pavements and houses and erected some sort of shelter and society on the waste of the world, is nothing but this: we have loved reading.