25 - Don't Read with Your Eyes

REMEMBER THE TWELFTH NIGHT party in Joyce's story "The Dead" that we looked at earlier? To a child of late-twentieth-century America (or early-twenty-first, for that matter), the meal is no big deal. Except for the goose. Not that many households in this country roast a goose for the holiday, or any holiday. But the rest looks pretty ordinary to us. A vase with stalks of celery, American apples and oranges on the sideboard, floury potatoes. Nothing very remarkable. Unless you live, as do the old ladies who provide the meal, in preelectrification Dublin, where it happens to be the sixth of January. So if you're going to understand the ladies, and the meal, and the story, you have to read through eyes that are not your own, eyes that, while not those of Aunts Kate and Julia, can take in the meaning of the meal they have provided. And those eyes did not grow up watching Animaniacs. The aunts have provided a meal beyond their limited means, in which they feed exotic and expensive produce to a substantial number of guests. Celery does not grow in Ireland in January, and the fruit is from America and therefore quite expensive. They have gone to considerable expense on Epiphany, the second most important day of the Christmas season, the day the Christ child was revealed to the wise men. In addition to its religious significance, the evening is also the old ladies' one big extravagance of the year, the party by which they cling to a fading gentility and memories of greater comfort as members of the middle class. We cannot understand their anxiety over the success of this gathering unless we see how important it is in their lives.

Or take this situation. James Baldwin's wonderful short story "Sonny's Blues" deals with a rather uptight math teacher in Harlem in the 1950s whose brother serves time in prison for heroin possession. At the end of the story there's a scene we looked at in an earlier chapter, where the brother, Sonny, has returned to playing in a club and the math teacher, our narrator, goes to hear him for the first time ever. There's been a lot of tension throughout the story since the two don't comprehend each other and the math teacher really can't fathom the troubles that drive Sonny and his music and his drug problem. Nor does he understand jazz; the only jazz name he can come up with is Louis Armstrong, proving to Sonny that he's hopelessly square. As the brother sits listening to Sonny with the jazz combo, however, he begins to hear in this beautiful, troubled music the depths of feeling and suffering and joy that lie behind it. So he sends an offering, a scotch and milk, that indicates understanding and brotherhood; Sonny sips, sets the drink back on the piano, and acknowledges the gift, which shimmers like "the very cup of trembling," in the closing words of the story. It's deep and emotional and biblical, with a resonance that very few stories ever achieve – about as close to perfection as we're likely to encounter. Now here's where the business of interpretation gets interesting. At my school, there are sociology/social work classes on substance abuse. And two or three times I've had a recent student in said substance abuse classes show up at discussions of "Sonny's Blues," very earnestly saying something like, "You should never give alcohol to a recovering addict." Perfectly true, I'm sure. In this context, though, not helpful. This story was published in 1957, using the best information Baldwin had at that time, and it is meant as a study of relations between brothers, not as a treatise on addiction. It's about redemption, not recovery. If you read it as the latter, that is, if you don't adjust your eyes and mind to transport you from contemporary reality to Baldwin's 1957, whatever the ending has to offer will be pretty well lost on you.

We all have our own blind spots, and that's normal. We expect a certain amount of verisimilitude, of faithfulness to the world we know, in what we watch and what we read. On the other hand, a too rigid insistence on the fictive world corresponding on all points to the world we know can be terribly limiting not only to our enjoyment but to our understanding of literary works. So how much is too much? What can we reasonably demand of our reading?

That's up to you. But I'll tell you what I think, and what I try to do. It seems to me that if we want to get the most out of our reading, as far as is reasonable, we have to try to take the works as they were intended to be taken. The formula I generally offer is this: don't read with your eyes. What I really mean is, don't read only from your own fixed position in the Year of Our Lord two thousand and some. Instead try to find a reading perspective that allows for sympathy with the historical moment of the story, that understands the text as having been written against its own social, historical, cultural, and personal background. There are dangers in this, and I'll return to them. I also need to acknowledge here that there is a different model of professional reading, deconstruction, that pushes skepticism and doubt to its extreme, questioning nearly everything in the story or poem at hand, to deconstruct the work and show how the author is not really in charge of his materials. The goal of these deconstructive readings is to demonstrate how the work is controlled and reduced by the values and prejudices of its own time. As you will have discerned, this is an approach with which I have limited sympathy. At the end of the day, I prefer to like the works I analyze. But that's another story.

Let's return for a moment to Baldwin's math teacher and Sonny's addiction. The comment about giving alcohol to an addict betrays a certain mind-set about social problems as well as a unique history of artistic and popular culture experiences on the part of the reader that are at odds with the story's own goals. "Sonny's Blues" is about redemption, but not the one students have been conditioned to expect. So much of our popular culture - daytime talk shows, made-for-television movies, magazine articles - leads us to think in terms of identifying a problem, such as addiction, and seeking a simple, direct solution. In its place, such thinking makes perfect sense. On the other hand, Baldwin is only slightly interested in Sonny's addiction in and of itself; what he really cares about is the brother's emotional turmoil. Everything in the story points to this interest. The point of view (the brother's), the depth of detail about the brother's life relative to Sonny's, the direct access to the brother's thoughts, all remind us this is about the narrator and not the jazzman. Most tellingly, it is the brother who is removed from his world, taken out of his comfort zone, when he follows Sonny to meet with other musicians and then to hear Sonny play. If you want to put pressure on a character to cause him to change or crumble, take him away from home, make him inhabit an alien world. For the middle-class math teacher, the world of jazz might as well be Neptune.

Here's why this business of the reader's perspective matters. This story falls into that very large category that I call "last-chance-for-change" stories. Not a terribly scientific name, I'll grant, but that's what they are. Here's how they work: the character - sufficiently old to have experienced a number of opportunities to grow, to reform, to get it right, but of course he never has - is presented with one more chance, one last opportunity to educate himself in this most important area (and it varies with the story) where up to now he has remained stunted. The reason he's older is just the opposite of why the quester is typically younger: his possibilities for growth are limited and time is running out. In other words, there is a time imperative, a sort of urgency as the sands run out. And then the situation in which he finds himself needs to be compelling. Our guy? He's never understood or sympathized with his brother, even to the point of not visiting him in prison. When the narrator's daughter dies and Sonny writes a caring letter of sympathy, he makes the narrator (I'm sorry he doesn't have a name) feel even greater guilt. Now that Sonny is out of prison and not using heroin, the narrator has a chance to get to know his younger, troubled brother as he never has before. If he can't do that this time, he never will. And this leads us to the point of the last-chance-for-change story, which is always the same: can this person be saved? This is the question Baldwin is asking in the story, but he's not asking it about Sonny. In fact (such is the heartlessness of authors), for the question to really matter to us in terms of the narrator, Sonny's own future must be very cloudy. Whether he can do the one thing in the world he's good at and not be drawn back into the addiction that is rife within the jazz community, we cannot know. Our doubts on his behalf add to the urgency of the narrator's growth; anyone can love and understand a reformed junkie, but one who may not be reformed, who admits the perils are still there

for him, offers real difficulties. Now if we read the story through the filter of daytime talk shows and social work classes, we not only miss the focus of the story, we misunderstand it at its most basic level. Sonny's trouble is interesting, of course, but it's merely the hook to draw us in; the real issues the story raises all concern the narrator/brother. If we see it as Sonny's story, the resolution will be profoundly dissatisfying. If we understand it as the brother's, it works beautifully.

And this is a fairly recent story. How much harder to understand the mind-set behind, say, Moby-Dick. The Last of the Mohicans. The Iliad. All that violence. A diet that is almost purely carnivorous. Blood sacrifices. Looting. Multiple gods. Concubines. Those readers who have been raised in a monotheistic culture (which is all of us, whatever our religious persuasion or lack thereof, who live within the Western tradition) might have a little trouble with the piety of the Greeks, whose chief implement of religious practice is the carving knife. Indeed, the very setup of the epic, in which Achilles throws a fit and withdraws from the war because his sex slave has been taken from him, does not engage our sympathies as it would have those of the ancient Greek audience. For that matter, his "redemption," in which he proves he's back on track by slaughtering every Trojan in sight, strikes us as distinctly barbaric. So what can this "great work" and its spirituality, sexual politics, code of machismo, and overwrought violence teach us? Plenty, if we're willing to read with the eyes of a Greek. A really, really old Greek. Achilles destroys the thing he holds most dear, his lifelong friend Patroclus, and dooms himself to an early death by allowing excessive pride to overrule his judgment. Even great men must learn to bend. Anger is unbecoming. One day our destiny will come for us, and even the gods can't stop it. There are lots of useful lessons in The Iliad, but while it may at times read like an episode of The Jerry Springer Show, we'll miss most of them if we read it through the lens of our own popular culture.

Now, about that danger I mentioned earlier. Too much acceptance of the author's viewpoint can lead to difficulties. Do we have to accept the values of a three-thousand-year-old blood culture as depicted in the Homeric epics? Absolutely not. I think we should frown on the wanton destruction of societies, on the enslavement of conquered peoples, on keeping concubines, on wholesale slaughter. At the same time, though, we need to understand that the Mycenaean Greeks did not. So if we would understand The Iliad (and it is worth understanding), we have to accept those values for those characters. Must we accept the novel that is full of racial hatred, that vilifies persons of African or Asian or Jewish ancestry? Of course not. Is The Merchant of Venice anti-Semitic? Probably. More or less so than its historical moment? Much less, I should think. Shylock, while hardly a glowing picture of the Jew, is at least given reasons for being as he is, is invested with a kind of humanity that many nonfiction tracts of the Elizabethan period do not credit Jews with having. Shakespeare does not blame him for the Crucifixion, nor does he recommend burning Jews at the stake (as was happening in the century of the play's composition in other parts of Europe). So accept the play or reject it? Do as you see fit. What I would suggest is that we see Shylock's villainy in the context of the difficult and complex situation Shakespeare creates for him, see if he makes sense as an individual and not merely as a type or representative of a hated group, see if the play works independently of whatever bigotry might lie behind it or if it requires that bigotry to function as art. For me, if it must rely on hatred in order to function, it has to go. I don't see Merchant working only or even primarily as a product of bigotry, and I will go on reading it, although there are many works by Shakespeare that I like better and return to more regularly. Each reader or viewer must decide this one for himself. The one thing I find unacceptable is to reject it, or any work, sight unseen.

Let's take, briefly, a more recent and more troubling example. The Cantos of Ezra Pound have some marvelous passages, but they also contain some very ugly views of Jewish culture and Jewish people. More to the point, they are the product of a man who was capable of being much more anti-Semitic than he is in the poems, as he proved in his wartime broadcasts on Italian radio. I sort of weaseled my

way around the issue with Shakespeare, claiming that he was somewhat less bigoted than his time; I can make no such claim for Pound. Moreover, that he made such statements at precisely the time that millions of Jews were being put to death by the Nazis only compounds our sense of outrage toward him. Nor can we write it off as insanity, which is what the defense counsel did at his trial for treason (he was charged with broadcasting for the enemy). So what about the poetry? Well, you decide. I know Jewish readers who still read Pound and claim to gain something from the experience, others who refuse to have anything to do with him, and still others who read him but rant against him all the while. Nor does one have to be Jewish. I do still read Pound, some. I find much that is astonishing, beautiful, haunting, powerful. Very much worthwhile. I also find, with some regularity, myself asking, How could someone so talented be so blind, so arrogant, so bigoted? The answer is, I don't know. The more time I spend with him, the more I'm astonished by his capacity for folly. It's unfortunate that genius was harnessed to someone who may not have worn it well. I find the Cantos, for all its brilliance, a very flawed masterpiece; flawed for reasons other than the anti-Semitism, but certainly more flawed because of it. It remains one of the half dozen or so most important works in my field of specialization, however, so I can't turn my back on it even if I want to. I've been telling you earlier in this chapter that you generally want to adopt the worldview the work requests of its audience. Sometimes, though, as in the case of Pound and his Cantos, the work asks too much.

Now here is where I envy you. If you are a professor, you have to deal with some pretty unsavory characters and some questionable works. If you only want to read like one, you can walk away whenever you want to.