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SLOW READING: LEARNING IN THE TIME OF THE BODY

Like many of my colleagues across a wide range of schools, I find that the students I teach¹ have increasingly great difficulties with language at every point: speaking and hearing, writing and reading alike. So far as I have been able to tell—this is something with which I am actively and currently struggling—they hear words as a rush of sound with familiar blips that they can treat as keywords, and they write down text as if it were pictures. We cannot speak to each other of anything that requires focused textual work, though they are friendly and willing, and I am eager to engage them with the words and ideas that I find so exciting.

In my efforts to work out what might be going on, I came across the case of a 54 year old woman (not one of my students) who could speak and read, but could not write the letters of the alphabet. "The patient could accurately copy letters which she could not write," we are told, and "The writing impairment...appeared to consist of a memory difficulty for the motor movements associated with letters." She treated letters as pictures, but could not make them mean. In the research on this case the failure appears *not* as an abstractly intellectual one, but as a kinetic one, suggesting that "dysgraphia for letters may represent a specific type of motor memory deficit, dissociable from copying skills and the ability to draw letter-like forms."² The problem is not that this subject has sound and sight but no meaning; it is that one important part of corporeal meaningfulness no longer seems to be working. The parallel with the students' problems is imperfect, of course, as her rupture dealt only with writing and not with language

¹ I currently teach undergraduate core courses and the occasional undergraduate elective. While some of what I say here would apply to graduate teaching as well, some would not, because graduate students bring with them, if not a love of a particular course, at least a desire for long-term engagement with a given intellectual discipline.

² N. Kapur, and N.F. Lawton. "Dysgraphia for letters: a form of motor memory deficit?" in *Journal of Neurological Psychiatry*, 46:6 (1983): 573-75.

altogether—but it remains telling. The association of language and flesh has broken, profoundly for her, more mildly for our students, and not imperceptibly for the rest of us. They, we, can neither dwell in the word nor stretch into the sentence—not, at any rate, without an effort that we are not always sure how to make.

There seems to be general agreement that this difficulty with words is also, somehow, a difficulty with *time*. Our students, or at least my students, are certain that they are far more burdened by duties than anyone used to be (ever), and that this precludes, say, spending a lot of time reading Thomas Aquinas or worrying about the construction of sentences. Sociologists, for their part, are just as sure that those students suffer less from a lack of time than from time's mismanagement: several studies show that students spend appreciably more time socializing, physically or virtually, than studying, a trend linked in at least one study to the rather alarming finding that most learn pretty much nothing at all in their first two years of college.³

I want to consider another possibility: that the students' travails with time are much like my own, though perhaps more pronounced. Our schedules (mine and my colleagues' and our collective students') may well be overfull or badly organized, but we face too a more fundamental issue, not of time management, but of time's structure, the very form of our lived temporality. This problem is one of tenses, or rather of tensions, of attention and its extension. Time has become a great problem to us, though not, perhaps, a new one: Augustine, for instance, complained in the early fifth century of being "scattered in times whose order I do not understand,"⁴ while Teresa of Avila, in the sixteenth century, laments the difficulty of writing when other duties keep pulling her away.⁵ We have lost—but we were always losing, we have always tended to lose—both density (the tight, intense focus of the attention in the moment) and extension (the stretch along a non-momentary span), in favor of a scattered time—a

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics. *American Time Use Survey: Charts by Topic: Students*, November 16, 2012. <http://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/students.htm>. A time use study by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics found college students averaging 3.3 hours a day engaged in educational activities, 3.1 hours working, 8.3 hours sleeping, and 3.7 hours in leisure and sports activities. A study by Mindy Marks (UC Riverside) and Philip Babcock (UC Santa Barbara) notes the trend of diminished study time: "On average, students in 1961 studied 24 hours a week, while students in 2003 studied only 14 hours a week." Marks and Babcock hypothesize that increased leisure time is the primary factor here; major, school, and non-academic employment all turn out to be statistically irrelevant. See also: Avila, Sylvia, "Kids These Days Spend Less Time Studying and More Time Playing, Study Shows." *The Tufts Daily*, November 8, 2010. <http://www.tuftsdaily.com/features/kids-these-days-spend-less-time-studying-and-more-time-playing-study-shows-1.2397412#.TnJieE-dsiw>; Webley, Kayla. "\$80,000 For Beer Pong? Report Shows College Students Learn Little During First Two Years (Besides Party Skills)." *Time Newsfeed*, January 18, 2011. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/01/18/what-do-college-students-learn-in-the-first-two-years-not-a-whole-lot/#ixzz1Y3aERA5k>. Another study, noting how little students learn, particularly during their first two years of college, manages to blame both the students' use of time and their professors' research work.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11.39.

⁵ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 101.

dismembered, unremembered time—a time that is intriguing in a great many ways, but seems worrisomely to disallow learning, especially through words. Learning demands attention (in fact, intense attention) and extension both; it requires focus and memory. There are, of course, a great many factors causing, and a great many effects resulting from, what at least feels like an increasingly fractured time. Even if I did somehow grasp all or most of them, I could not do justice to discussing them in a single essay; my focus here will be upon the causes and effects that are specifically and clearly pedagogical. Probably these cannot be altered in isolation from the others—but it is possible, at least, that their alteration can be a starting point rather than an isolated instance. I should note that while I would not entirely discount our collective online time as a factor, I do not think that computer and particularly internet use alone can begin to account for time's fracturing (Augustine spent little time in such pursuits, I'm fairly sure). Nor am I placated by the idea, which I have heard several times, that our students have replaced textual with digital literacy. I don't find that most actually *are* very digitally literate; moreover, I find that those most capable in one medium (digital or print) actually tend to be the most capable in the other as well.

To revalue learning—especially, to value reading and other practices of words—I would suggest that we explore reading where it *has* been valued, and ask whether anything about that culture of reading might usefully be returned to our own. To return ourselves to a more literate temporality, I would argue, must also be to turn ourselves to a time more attentive to body and flesh—a time that is both slower and more sensuous. That this will seem counterintuitive to our tendency to understand body and language in distinction from one another is itself, I think, symptomatic.⁶ As Catherine Conybeare writes in analyzing the language of Augustine's *Confessions*, "Too often it is pretended – held out, offered up – that words on a page are already somehow divorced from the body, involved in the realm of the metaphysical." The result of this pretense is "the disembodied subject (or 'transcendental ego')," the unfortunate "lovechild of linguistics and philosophy."⁷ The time of our learning is doubly and destructively decoupled from body and from text, as those two are unjoined from each other. We have lost our ability to *understand*, and not simply to *say*, that learning takes time—an understanding more primal than our ability to devote our time to it.

That understanding seems to have been particularly pronounced in early and medieval monasticism, to which, accordingly, I shall turn here for clues on the carnality of learning. Already in the earliest monastic communities, as Harry Gamble points out, "monks were assisted toward literacy,"⁸ and monasticism associated with reading. Indeed, Gamble notes a

⁶ This is as true of efforts to focus on the body without attention to language as of a disembodied linguistic turn.

⁷ Catherine Conybeare, "Beyond Word and Image: Aural Patterning in Augustine's *Confessions*," in *Envisioning Experience in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Giselle de Nie and Thomas F.X. Noble (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), 143–64, at 145.

⁸ "When cenobitic monasticism developed in the early fourth century, monks were assisted toward literacy. Here too the ability to read was linked with religious vocation, as the spiritual exercises prescribed for monks included reading and meditating on scripture (though eremitic monks might or

list of excuses that literate Christians gave to John Chrysostom for not doing the private scriptural readings that he encouraged as accompaniment to the public liturgy. Some cite a lack of leisure, of the books, or of interest, but Gamble also notes the response, "I am not a monk."⁹ These excuses sound strikingly contemporary, though I suppose our students would most likely argue instead of the last that they are not professors, our class having replaced monks in the popular mind as the place of the sexlessly literate. M.B. Pranger points out that the deeply somatic temporalities of Medieval monasticism respond to "the problem of compression and extension—that is, the problem of time."¹⁰ Time is further problematized when we seem to lose both compression and extension in fracture and scattering, when we fail to gather time in the body. Brian Stock notes, "Medieval spirituality was concerned with the body in a more direct, practical manner than were the meditative practices of the ancient world, even though medieval thinkers were no less preoccupied than the ancients with emphasizing the superior status of the mind."¹¹ (We know better, of course, than simply to assume a modern mind-body dualism from this claim.) Can we, given the immense differences of culture and setting, adopt—or adapt—any of these corporeal concerns as our own?

BODILY TEXTS, TEXTUAL FLESH

Direct adoption will not be an option, of course, but perhaps adaptation will (with some necessary cautions and limitations thrown in). We might begin with the problem of speed. Pranger argues that monastic time is deliberately slowed and concentrated by multiple means—the training in classical genres, the slow timing of the sermon and scriptural meditation, and even the precisely constrained and ritualized time of daily living.¹² More, this slow time is not directed at progress and conclusion. In monastic life, Pranger writes, "the progressive concept of time is bent, so to speak, and made curvilinear, so that it obeys the patterns and rituals of retardation and repetition."¹³ To retard and repeat, to slow the "now" and return it to "then," is

might not have been literate)." Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 10.

⁹ Gamble, *Books*, 233. Gamble cites *De Laz.* (available in *Four Discourses, Chiefly Concerning the Rich Man and Lazarus*, Discourse 3, trans. F. Allen (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1869), also at http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chrysostom_four_discourses_00_intro.htm); *Homilies on Genesis* 21 (available in *The Fathers of the Church: John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990); and *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew* 2 (available in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, Volume 10, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 2.

¹⁰ M.B. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity: Essays on the Poetics of Monasticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 41.

¹¹ Brian Stock, *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 18.

¹² Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 23. "The monastery, for its part, is purposely artificial. As such it is small and intense."

¹³ Ibid., 22. "From the patristic-era sources of medieval literature until the high Middle Ages (twelfth century), the slowest movement imaginable of life, language, and thought is to be found. ... The monastery's is a triple fixity: the fixity of classical genres as part of the monk's basic training, a more extensive fixity of the sermon (*collatio*) and the rumination on Scripture reflecting a continuing and

to curve attentive focus and temporal stretch into something quite other than the goal-orientation that monopolizes our current educational focus (to, I would unoriginally argue, its grave detriment).

Pranger elegantly details the ways in which monastic literacy is mutually structured with monastic time—reading itself is compressed and extended (in the classical reading, the sermon, and the meditation upon the text), slowed and repeated; and it is what compresses, extends, slows and returns time, too. In the dual movements of attention focused and extended, the time of the body and the time of text return to one another and turn about in the slow curve of learning as living. Perhaps, though to an extent greatly limited by our spatial expansiveness and our lives' distractions, we can return to the power and the pleasure of such bodily time, such physical reading. For all of its artifice, such textual time is truer to the body than is our current habit of learning in order to cease to learn, of teaching toward tests and outcomes assessments, so that the mind can eagerly abandon its knowledge once the calculations are finished—an artifice that attempts to disembody learning and requires the assumption that the flesh does not form the habit of literacy, but rather re-forms and abandons forms, rapidly and abruptly. Our overwhelming emphasis on quantifiable result, with the desired object of measure determined in advance, has been famously terrible for all sorts of learning, particularly in the humanities. One reason, I think, is precisely that it demands a model of learning that is so utterly at odds with the living, thinking bodies in which we learn.

MONASTIC SLOWNESS

Time's extension makes demands upon both memory and attention. Slowness ("a retardation verging on ... eternity," says Pranger)¹⁴ combines the extension of attentiveness over time with the density of a contracture that plays out spatially as cloistering, temporally as the intensification of attention, as focus that can both tighten and stretch. To focus attentively on an extended time is a manner of slowing time, or more exactly of slowing our temporal sense. I don't know that we need to learn more slowly in the sense of taking in fewer texts or less information over the same period of time, but perhaps we should relearn *slowness*, as the stretch of time. We know, from explicit bodily instruction such as that in dance or sport and from the everyday learning of corporeal habit, that bodies learn slowly, a slowness linked to repetition. And while we don't learn text by the same pure drilled-in repetition by which we learn movement, we do better in both to start by slowing the movement down, giving ourselves time to consider each part of it. Reading and remembering, whether as briefly as the extent of a sentence or as long as the labor of a life, take time; speaking and listening remind us still more strongly of this time's fleshy character.

uneventfulness unknown to the world in which the monk had been living previously, and, finally, the all-embracing fixity of his lifestyle."

¹⁴ cf. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 21. "In order to meet the requirement just formulated to produce an alternative concept of time, my focus will be...on slowing down, on retardation verging on immobility, and, indeed, on eternity."

Taking time is importantly not the sort of laziness that creates the scattering of attention here and there with longer inattentive stretches between. It is, instead, a matter of attending precisely, rather than rushing past. Working toward an analysis of the glacial tempo of monastic sermonizing, Pranger pauses to remark on "The Romanian conductor Sergiu Clibidache," who "was famous for his extremely slow tempi. ... Listening..., however, one did not notice this slowness. What came to the fore was a high degree of clarity, conveying to the ear the majestic structure of the piece so as to cause movement and rest almost to coalesce."¹⁵ Indeed, slowness often creates clearness, in language and in thought as much as in music, dwelling in the moments and attending to their series, rather than awaiting only the rest of completion—in the near-coalescence of movement and rest, we *dwell* on passages, on ideas, on words; on them, and in them, too. We cannot attend to moments when we are too focused on what comes after, on pre-specified goals that have nothing to do with the pleasure and difficulty inherent in the moment and the movement. When we become exclusively focused on results, we also become reluctant to linger, or to repeat—to reach clarity. The results suffer too, and the more narrowly we focus upon them, the worse they become. Of course we cannot teach, much less grade, without desiring some accomplishment—but we can return the focus to the accomplishment of process itself, a process of remaking ourselves (importantly, this process is communal) more than of the acquisition of skills as if they were possessions or even tools. The requirement of some evaluation is real enough (however much the idealist in each of us might wish for a pure teaching for the joy of it), but evaluation of any kind should be subsequent to and consequent upon what we actually do pedagogically, rather than driving and directing our teaching and learning from the outset. To pay attention slowly means to pay attention *now*—for as long as now may take.

But paying attention, or focusing—concentrating and extending the moment—is not necessarily a matter of remaining on a single track. It is actually our reluctance to pay slow attention (our desire to reach the end to which all of our focus is drawn) that leads us to fear digression as if it were hostile to learning. Pranger notes the contrary argument of Gregory the Great, who declares that commentary should be like the flow of a river: "For, when a river flows through its bed, hitting on both sides open valleys, it immediately changes its course. And when it has filled those open spaces sufficiently, it all of a sudden returns to its bed."¹⁶ Learning too should be able to flow into possibilities, without fear that the line of thought will be unavailable for return. It is perhaps becoming apparent that attention, though it is certainly not identical with joy (little focuses the mind so obsessively as a toothache, for instance), is assisted by joy, by delight—and delight may equally well obsess over a single thought or follow a quite surprising tangent. Returning from the tangential, we find our earlier understanding enriched by both knowledge and pleasure, and we repeat the earlier ideas, readings, topics with renewed attention. More: a willingness to digress respects the openness of time and of text, the fact that we do not know in advance what we might learn.

¹⁵ Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 89.

Repeating the "same" material from a new perspective, or enriched by our tangential thinking, we slowly form the habits of thought, so that we do not have to think so much about thinking, and we can begin, as we acquire and embody the techniques of thought, to move in it with some measure of skill and perhaps even grace—not to be done with moving, but to be able to move, to be skilled in flesh and word, even more. We may begin to use words as we may play music or dance, not with an eye to the test that will let us be done with it, but with pleasure (a pleasure that does not deny attendant frustrations) in the widening of our range of abilities and possibilities.

I have said that we need to be able to focus extensively—but we also need to be able to shift our focus, which is not the same as losing it. While, as I've noted, slow attention is importantly different from inattentiveness, some inattention to particular topics is also required. The pursuit of tangents is somewhat like this, but tangents are always connected to the original thought. We must sometimes disconnect. Taking time means leaving time enough—not only time to digress, but time between. In the academy as in the more evident corporeality of music or dance, learning can interfere with learning if there is insufficient temporal space. For instance, studies show that back to back learning of finger patterns tends to lead to forgetting them all, but learning such patterns with a temporal gap between allows us to retain multiple sets.¹⁷ Not dissimilarly, Seneca remarks, in Brian Stock's paraphrase, that "reading is like physical exercise, which achieves its best results if spurts of activity are followed by periods of relaxation."¹⁸ This must sound a bit counter to the arguments I have been making: what is broken time if not activity in spurts, the incapacity for attention conveniently creating the necessary breaks? The difference between Seneca's exercise of reading and the loss of language, however, is at least twofold. One aspect is simply quantitative; his bursts, one suspects, were not merely a minute or two in length, and the quantitative difference in reading time becomes a qualitative difference in the nature of attentive absorption. Thus, relatedly, the second difference is that between "active" time, the clarity of slow precise focus, and an uninvested, half-focused attention with an eye always on afterward.

Learning takes time: wandering time, open time, and repetition, waiting for the moment when the body-mind *gets it* and the focus, though no less, can stop standing outside to reflect upon itself. Eager for efficiency, we do not allow thought its time, but test and forget and hurry on. Learning in the moment is rendered joyless, and understanding fades with discouraging speed.

¹⁷ Studying and testing a variety of rhythmic "skilled sequential finger movements," John W. Krakauer and Rheza Shadmehr found that learning movement series in immediate sequence resulted in interference of one with the other and consequent forgetfulness, but allowing six hours between learning series let subjects remember without such interference. J.W. Krakauer and R. Shadmehr, "Consolidation of motor memory," in *Trends in Neurosciences*, 29 (2006): 58-64, at 58-60.

¹⁸ Stock, *After Augustine*, 52. Stock cites Seneca, Moral Epistles, 15.2-6. The text is available at http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_1.html#%E2%80%98XV1: "Of course I do not command you to be always bending over your books and your writing materials; the mind must have a change, but a change of such a kind that it is not unnerved, but merely unbent."

Neatly lined up, eager to get our learning over with, we find that it is over too quickly, forgotten as we move urgently on.

Sometimes, of course, we move slowly because we are *inattentive*, because we have to return from successive disruptions of attention. To move slowly with intent is different; it is not to remove the dense intensity of attention from time—in fact, it is to enable that attention, to allow us to dwell in moments, in movements, in texts rather than having always to anticipate what comes up next (of course there can be pleasure and value to such anticipation—but not if it is a constant, or our only option). And just as we can build strength and endurance in the muscles, so too we develop them in our ability to dwell and think in words.

URGENT MEMORY AND CONSTRAINED SPACES

The curiously intense, concentrated lives of early medieval monks exemplify, Pranger writes, a double sense of slowness—reiteration, amplification, minute attention—and urgency—precisely in the workings of memory.¹⁹ Both are aspects of attention, with its echoes of awaiting built into its sense of immediate focus. Without the memory that the extension of time might grant, we have lost intensity too.

Even a daydream, however, has to be a little bit realistic; in this case, we have to acknowledge that such focus is far harder in the contemporary academy than in the medieval monastery, and that communal memories will be difficult at best to construct. The enclosure of the monastery is not only temporal, but spatial; "the enclosed garden of the monastic site," Pranger notes, is particularly adapted to bearing the "violent love" of an insatiable divinity.²⁰ It is, as well, a space of memory, not least as successive generations of monks inhabit it; and even a space of mnemonics.²¹

Yet a monastic enclosure is also an enclosure within language: "The dense structure of [the monk's] existence is reminiscent of the compactness of a book ... That which, for the extramural reader, is bound to remain a matter of imagination has become reality for the monk. In the compact, 'curved' world of the monastery he becomes identical with the rhythm and density of his linguistic corpus."²² Dense, intense attention to text is also attention to *rhythm*, and rhythm is foremost in our muscles, our heartbeats, our breath. We have to attend to the body of the text

¹⁹ Thus Pranger notes, for instance, of the monastic sermon, "On the one hand, there is retardation, as, for example, in the endless amplifications of allegory that are part of the sermon genre; retardation becomes so prominent as to make motion indistinguishable from motionlessness. On the other hand, there is an undeniable sense of urgency, produced...by the inner workings—and turmoil—of the monastic memory." Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 88.

²⁰ Ibid., 25.

²¹ For bringing this to my attention, I am grateful to Nell Champoux, whose doctoral research in Religion at Syracuse University has focused on just such issues.

²² Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 25.

with, as, our own embodiedness. Thus attentive, we enter into a history of thought, a tradition of thinking.

We remain extramural readers, but in our small and temporary ways perhaps we *can* recreate this attention. We do it already in studio spaces, as any visitor to a school of music, dance, visual arts, or theater can attest: there is a focused creative seriousness to such space that is distinctly absent from many academic classrooms. I shall not focus here on what are undoubtedly relevant architectural differences, but only on temporal and corporeal difference. And again, part of the difference is a focus in the present, in its difficulty and its delight. This is the delight that lets us digress or move slowly not because we are tired of the text, but precisely because we are not; not because we are measuring our learning, but because we are dwelling in it, eager to think more and to think more readily.

Delight is not the contrary of discipline, but—again, as dance or music can show us—entirely caught up with it. In monastic endeavors, says Stock, "an interest was shown not only in the body...but in the emotions that accompanied the body through time."²³ It matters to us, as teachers and as students, that texts are affective. The texts with which the monks spend so much of their days don't *illustrate* discipline, development, the ascent of the soul, even the infiltration of joy into daily despair—they *induce* them. This induction requires a great absorption in the text. With a few exceptions, such as the handbooks of monastic Rules, the texts aren't how-to manuals; rather, they implicate the reader, such that reading becomes a doing—a creation, as Rebecca Krawiec notes, of social memory,²⁴ of an us within which the self is transformed, expanded by its very spatial and temporal constraints into the community and into history.

The best classes manifest a curious communal pleasure precisely in and through the concentration and extension of the attentive attendants. When we lose these tensions in the "everyday" character of our time and space—time and space to which we do not pay exquisite and living attention—we become individuals who have lost not only community but the sacred in our worlds as well. Pranger dates the emergence of our strong sense of the individual subject a little later than most, to the twelfth century, precisely when we begin to lose the monastic enclosure and the density that it allows.²⁵ Contemporary concerns intensify this movement of disenclosure; as we extend ourselves virtually, we forget also to contract our attention, to enclose it in a thought, a text, a motion of the muscles. And forgetting to attend, we simply forget.

The question of enclosure is one of the most vexed for pedagogical purposes. The monastery en-closes, but it also closes out, demanding a *contemptus mundi* that we actively want *not* to

²³ Stock, *After Augustine*, 19.

²⁴ Rebecca Krawiec, "Evagrius, Text, and Memory: Writing and Tradition in the Egyptian Desert," presented at Oxford Classics Conference, 2011.

²⁵ Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 192-94.

instill in our students. We want, quite the contrary, to link the love of learning and of the text to the love of the world; the perception of that disconnection, the negative heritage of monasticism, may even be a factor in turning off the desire to work and dwell in words. This makes the argument for the re-embodiment of learning and the re-sensualization of language all the more urgent. We must attend to language not only as a sign-system, though this is terribly important in helping us to understand that our views of the world are constructed, but also as a bodily resonance that vibrates with what Merleau-Ponty called the flesh of the world.²⁶ It is true that absorption in anything will mean cutting out something else, however briefly; it is not true, though, that absorption in text must mean cutting off the lived, corporeal, relational world. As Friedrich Nietzsche points out, asceticism may derive from rejection, but it may also be a consequence of absorption.²⁷ In the occasional asceticism of textual work, we enrich and extend our modes of attention and recollection.

SENSE AND SENSES

We lose memory, ironically enough, as we make readings simply things to remember and reproduce, thus making of reading itself a product and not a process, an object and not an event. Monastic reading reminds us that the contractions and extensions of time and of space are not simply abstractions, but a quite corporeal process and experience. Monastic asceticism does not deny the flesh, but rereads and rewrites it. Pranger insists that even, indeed especially, in monastic life, “The basic facts of Christianity, even though they must be learned from a book, are so preeminently a matter of sense that, upon hearing the biblical narrative, we feel that we could have seen, heard, felt, touched, and smelled what was going on at the time of its creation and foundation.”²⁸ The monk *attends*, not least to sense, with a density that has now become profoundly elusive, and this density is at once an attention to, and a discipline of, the sensitive and affective flesh.

We seem to think now that if we take care of the sense, the sounds will take care of themselves—or at least that they needn’t demand our attention as well. Lewis Carroll, who made this punning suggestion,²⁹ knew better—as the very fact of the pun already indicates. When we read for sense, as Augustine long ago noticed, we read in anticipation and recollection; we hear the syllables pass as we strain, waiting, for the end of the sentence; we remember them as we gather the sentence together and see what the meaning was. And this is good: in it is the work of memory and the kind of anticipation that does not let go of the present. But when instead we try to *remove* the present from time, as he also realized, we are left with no time at all. The problem of sense and sound is itself a problem of time. We can only

²⁶ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), essay 3, 77-136.

²⁸ Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 284.

²⁹ American English may make the pun, which hinges on pence and pounds, obscure.

really attend to the sense if we do not disregard the sensuous too. If our reading—however nonscriptural our text—is not quite *lectio divina*, in all its contentious interestingness, it is nonetheless not altogether distinct from the latter's attention to sound, its metaphors of mirroring,³⁰ speaking-with, or even digestion.³¹

We cannot, of course, make our classrooms into tiny monasteries, nor do we, usually, want to—though the temptation must occasionally strike. But we can embody the movement of attention that is not distraction, attention to textual flesh and sensual text, attention to the wanderings of the subject itself, with its subsidiaries and tributaries. We can attend to the rhythms and returns of an argument, the flow of sound in a poem, the outward stretch of an ancient hymn. We can, for a few hours, pay attention. We can read together, and aloud; we can take pleasure in voice and breath and vibration, and make reading, too, not something to have done with. Texts from just about as early as we have texts—from the Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*—tell us to attend not just to what they say, but to the reading of them: "Climb the stone staircase," we are instructed in the preface to the poem. The palace at Uruk is described in sumptuous detail, the place set, before we are instructed to retrieve the tablets on which the tale itself is inscribed:

Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine,
 approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar,
 a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty,
 walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course
 around the city, inspect its mighty foundations,
 examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built,
 observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens,
 the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops
 and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares.
 Find the cornerstone and under it the copper box
 that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid.
 Take out the tablet of lapis lazuli. Read
 how Gilgamesh suffered all and accomplished all.³²

The text itself, in Stephen Mitchell's gorgeous rendition, slows us down, makes us wander with it. Or consider the lovely, more contemporary set up of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, which takes us through the process of finding and buying the book, and urges us, with examples, into a comfortable, pleasurable reading position—including hanging upside down,

³⁰ See a basic informational website on the notion at <http://www.goodnews.ie/lectio.shtml>.

³¹ "Lectio Divina has been likened to 'Feasting on the Word.' The four parts are first taking a bite (Lectio), then chewing on it (Meditatio). Next is the opportunity to savor the essence of it (Oratio). Finally, the Word is digested and made a part of the body (Contemplatio)." Luke Dysinger, "Lectio Divina," in *The Oblate Life*, ed. Gervase Holdaway (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2008), 107-17, at 109.

³² Steven Mitchell, *Gilgamesh: A New English Version* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 69-70.

should we wish.³³ Here, too, is an enclosure, not in the walls of the city, but within the space of the book:

Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice—they won't hear you otherwise—"I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!" ...Or if you prefer, don't say anything, just hope that they'll leave you alone.³⁴

Pay attention to how you read, these texts urge us. Attend, and give the word space. As my colleague Jennifer Glancy has reminded me, this is also the urging of Irenaeus, who writes to those who must decipher text without gap or punctuation—and who must, therefore, in the reading, breathe and pause. At times, as he notes, the very meaning of the text depends upon where we draw breath. He writes of an ambiguous Pauline text,³⁵ "If then anyone does not pay attention to the reading and neglects to indicate by pauses the person of whom Paul wants to speak, he will read not only incoherence but blasphemy, as if the coming of the Lord would take place by the working of Satan."³⁶ As Glancy reminds us, "The reader's pause is nothing other than a breath, the corporal movement of an orthodox *spiritus*".³⁷

Our texts, of course, come not only with word breaks, but with useful punctuation. I have found, however, that the inability to read aloud and the inability to punctuate tend both to occur rather widely and in the same persons: losing the aurality of text, the sensual side of the sense of the sentence, we lose its sense as meaning too. That is, when students cannot use or understand punctuation, we encounter very Irenaean problems: breaks in the wrong places, or the wrong breaks, and these mean also a loss of continuity and connection, a time out of joint, out of flesh.

³³ I cannot resist pointing out that this is not the odd notion it might seem; I still occasionally read hanging upside down, though not nearly so often as I did in childhood. It is quite pleasant for the upper back, but note-taking is rendered difficult.

³⁴ Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981), 3.

³⁵ Glancy cites the text, from 2 Thessalonians, and summarizes Irenaeus's worries. First, the text: "And then will be revealed the Lawless One, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath [spiritus] of his mouth..., he whose coming will take place by the working of Satan with all power and signs and portents of falsehood." Glancy writes, "On one reading—in fact on the easier reading—it seems that the coming of the Lord Jesus will take place by the working of Satan. Irenaeus insists that in the corporal reading of the text the reader should make clear that the working of Satan leads instead to the coming of the Lawless One." Jennifer Glancy, "Reading Bodies, Reading Scripture," delivered at the July 2011 International Society for Biblical Literature meeting (London).

³⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (electronic version, Wyatt North Publishing, 2012), 3 and 7.

³⁷ Glancy.

To read thus physically is to read slowly and, as Gamble reminds us, repeatedly: "The initial reading of any text was inevitably experimental because it had to be decided, partly in retrospect, which of the possible construals of *scriptio continua* best rendered the sense."³⁸ To read here is to re-read, to move the eyes back over as well as forward, to *sound* out, to carve into muscle memory the contraction of the throat and the intake of breath. This we may continue to do, even with breaks already given.

To include so much (in) time, to concentrate the moment to the intensity of the eternal, to stretch the attention span out beyond closure, we must be, as I have suggested, a bit ascetic too. Pranger quotes Robert Musil's strange and lovely *The Man Without Qualities*: "So I offer you my conclusion that beauty and excitement come into the world as a result of things having been left out."³⁹ Reading is an ascetic practice, a shutting out of the world outside the walls, of the television in the next room. Intensity of focus, of attention, lets a great deal drop away. One attends, and one lets drop away, and one concentrates, and for that time, time is mended. It will shatter and scatter again. But for that moment the discipline, the constraint, the persistent imposition of artifice is, rather like the monastic text, precisely the source of freedom, and of the sheer *life* of mind as of movement. It is not, again, a rejection of the extramural world, but a practice of dwelling by which our lives in that world may be enriched.

Without forcing the parallel too far, we may still reasonably think of learning in words as a matter of learning in the body too, and, accordingly, we may find it useful to think about what it's like to learn to do bodily things. To create muscle memory demands repetition and temporal space, and it makes extension (the ability to sustain) and focus (the ability to dwell in); that is, there is a feedback loop of what we need to do and what we are able to do. We recognize here a parallel to the dual time of reading. The process of creating bodily memory is sometimes described as that of repeating an act until it becomes unconscious, but of course we are seldom actually unconscious when we dance, or run, or even for that matter when we tie our shoes. Probably one reason for the notion that the act is unconscious is that in it we are quite possibly not *reflective*: we are in the movement, not outside it analyzing or taking its picture for Facebook. We may be distracted—tying our shoes does not, most mornings, take up very much of our attention—or we may be utterly absorbed—it is sometimes a bit surprising to find oneself having finished a performance, or a book, after one's attention in and to its moments almost seemed to keep time from passing. But we have not ceased thinking; we have simply been thinking with an unusually clear carnality; we have learned with the clarity of slowness that can later allow clearness in speed. The sense of body slipping readily into a long-familiar discipline, or the delight of a movement newly becoming "natural," are echoed in the delight of new revelation in a well-studied text and the simple pleasure of knowing the words (I cannot be the only person who sneakily enjoys reciting the various formulations of the categorical imperative, for instance) and of finding an astonishing new text and trying to follow it through.

³⁸ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 205.

³⁹ Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 25. Pranger cites Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, vol. 2, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967), 336.

Thus too, when we read with a sense of the sounds, we repeat in order to know; we take the luxuriant pleasure of slow simplicity and indulge in the virtuosity of speed and complexity. The mind, too, moves its muscles.

Contemplation is likewise bodily, even if not in so obvious a way as some other modes of learning and thinking. Nearly every contemplative tradition recommends particular postures and the control of sensation. Pranger notes of the writings of the Jesuit founder Ignatius Loyola, famous for his widely-practiced spiritual exercises:

efforts to mitigate bodily concreteness by reinterpreting the famous five weeks of exercises as so many stimuli to arouse concomitant pious feelings in the soul should be rejected out of hand. ... The combination of "concrete" places and images reintroduces the senses. Not unexpectedly, later theologians have tried to tone down this aspect and to turn the famous Ignatian "application of the senses" to scenes from Hell and the life of Christ into a merely spiritual affair.⁴⁰

We try to turn learning into a merely spiritual or purely mental affair as well, but neither reading nor writing, nor listening nor speaking, is a properly spiritual exercise when it is not an exercise of the flesh and the senses too. It's not that we don't train bodies; in a process beginning no later than kindergarten, we render them docile, but a little hostile to learning, too. I say this not because my students are physically fidgety—they are not, to an almost disturbing degree. Nor is it simply the inverse—that their passivity disturbs me—although it does, a bit. But what disturbs me more, though its physicality is less obvious, is that increasing inability to process language, which seems an extension of a broader passive disengagement. (One element of attending properly to reading might even be getting rid of particularly horrible classroom furniture, of the sort that absolutely requires one to distract oneself from bodily discomfort and so from the body altogether.)

Body and language are in strange relation to one another, I have elsewhere argued, at once so intimate as to be at times indistinguishable, and yet so fundamentally distinct as to be always infinitely reaching to one another.⁴¹ We lose something of the possibility, the potential and the pleasure, of each in isolating them, but this does not mean that we can quite identify them. What we can do, though, is to attend to their mutual shaping: by reading aloud, returning sociality and text to one another; by reading slowly, returning sensuousness to sense; by thinking digressively, returning wandering pleasure to sharp focus; by returning, to text and so also to us.

We need to focus on the text, to breathe in its rhythms and to read it in time with our breaths, to stretch ourselves into its sense, to let it form us again, to allow the time its density. Interestingly, my best student readers—especially in terms of reading aloud, but in terms of their ability to

⁴⁰ Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 286.

⁴¹ This is the running argument of *Word Made Skin* (New York: Fordham, 2004).

understand as well—are often theater majors. Their training in attending to the rhythms and the affect of language also forces them to attend to meaning (again, the strict separation is a false one). Julia Kristeva cites Nietzsche as having declared, "To be mistaken about the rhythm of a sentence is to be mistaken about the very meaning of that sentence."⁴² This is so even in ways that Nietzsche could not have known—musical and linguistic syntax share "neural resources involved in structural integration in working memory."⁴³ In fact, as Aniruddh Patel notes in *Music, Language, and the Brain*, "Humans are unparalleled in their ability to make sense out of sound." In our reception of both music and language, we "convert complex acoustical sequences into perceptually discrete elements...organized into hierarchical structures that convey rich meaning."⁴⁴ That there is a kind of training that allows attention to the meaning of rhythm provides, at least for me, a glimmer of hope. We must read more, and read aloud, and enact.

We have trouble remembering, collectively, that the discipline of the flesh is not always its mortification, nor that of the spirit its disembodiment. Divorcing the text from its somatic quality, we have taken the possibility of textuality from the flesh. Because we no longer read in the time of the body, we can no longer embody the time of the text. The monk is trained as a reader. This in itself is fascinating, as many contemporary scholars have shown and are showing us. But he is trained, he trains himself, also as a text: not only by being available to the superior's interpretive skills, but also by embodying textual time, a time of movement and pauses, of urgency and slowness taken together, of the need to dwell and the urge to know more. Most of us are not training monks; many of us, myself included, are not training scholars. The students who come seeking only a certification that will allow them more profitable employment—not an unreasonable quest, particularly now—may not see much ground for this slow dwelling; thus it is increasingly important that we model both the practice and the pleasure. The skills with words and texts, habits of focus and sustaining, can only do well by those who form them, and to widen rather than constrain people's possibilities has always seemed to me fundamentally ethical. While there is need to be gentle and honest in facing the students' economic concerns, there is equally urgent need to broaden their concerns

⁴² Julia Kristeva gives this quotation as an epigraph on page 133 of *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon D. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). ("Se méprendre sur le rythme d'une phrase, c'est se méprendre sur le sens même de la phrase." Kristeva citing Nietzsche, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 156. Kaufmann renders the sentence somewhat differently: "A misunderstanding about its tempo, for example—and the sentence itself is misunderstood." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), sec. 246. Kaufmann's translation comes closer to the German: "Ein Missverständnis über sein Tempo zum Beispiel: und der Satz selbst ist missverstanden!" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), sec. 246. I have cited Kristeva's version because it makes the musical element more vivid, but in context it is clear that the tempo Nietzsche has in mind is musical as well.

⁴³ Aniruddh Patel, "Syntactic Processing in Language and Music: Different Cognitive Operations, Similar Neural Resources?" In *Music Perception*, 16:1 (Fall 1998): 27–42, at 28.

⁴⁴ Aniruddh Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

to the aspects and pleasures of living not quite so attentive to profit—nor, bureaucratic demands notwithstanding, to measurement.

In attending again to the bodiliness of text, we also textualize the time and the affect of the flesh. And this is not a distortion, but an art, of the body—like all arts, a potential source of deep delight emergent from a difficult discipline. Certainly up to the point at which we attempt to teach them, most undergraduate students have had little reason to associate discipline with pleasure. We cannot impose the pleasure, but we can, in modeling the slow discipline of it, perhaps impart it—or rather share it—just a little, nonetheless.

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