

READING THE WORLD

Those of us who love books in any shape or form, those of us who feel for the written word a curiously indefinable passion, attempt, whenever possible, within the limitations of our tangled lives, to live among books, to devote our efforts to them, because we know, in some ineffable way, that they magically hold the key to our own experience and to the memory of our world.

Our love of books is reflected or translated into an ancient metaphor: the world as book. It appears two and a half millennia ago, among nomad people for whom the Book was the Word of God. In the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet sees the heavens open and a hand appears, holding a roll of a book which is then spread before him “written within and without; and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe.” The image, picked up in the Book of Revelation, gave rise to an extensive library of biblical commentaries that, throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, saw in this double book an image of God’s creation, both in scripture and in earth, both of which we are meant to read and in both of which we are written.

By the seventeenth century, the image of the world as book had become so engrained in the Western imagination, that it could be once more taken up and rephrased. In *Religio Medici*, Sir Thomas Browne made the commonplace his own: “Thus there are two books from whence I collect my Divinity. Besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universal and publik Manuscript, that lies expans’d unto the eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discovered

him in the other.” Browne’s observation is true for every reader for whom world and book, book and world reflect and complement one another.

Dante, in the fourteenth century, believed that one of God’s books could not be read properly without the other. As Dante advances through the three perceptible realms of the Afterlife, the poetic or intellectual image of the world as book becomes more and more concrete, until it takes on what Dante calls “a universal shape,” the shape of a book. For Dante, reaching the final vision in the Empyrean, the ultimate reality is a book. Dante’s pilgrimage is therefore not only an act of material travel, a displacement in space, but also one in time. Unlike the physical traveller who simply follows the path forward, Dante the pilgrim, like a curious and reflective reader, while moving along the road from the first to the last page, allows himself to go back, to retrace explored territory, to recall, foretell and associate events past, present and future, leafing back and forth through God’s book, where “that which in the universe seems separate and scattered” is “gathered and bound by love in one single volume.” Of such convictions are readers and writers made.

In all probability, this was not the case in the beginning. Our incredible ancestor who, one remote afternoon in a faraway desert, over five thousand years ago, invented the art of writing, was not intent on communicating obscure desires and exultant hopes but rather a commercial transaction in goats or sheep. We must never forget that writing was not the creation of poets but of accountants.

The creation of reading necessarily preceded that of writing. In order to set down a code that would transmit information of some kind, that code had to be first deciphered, that is to say, read by its future users.

This precedence granted reading a jealous primacy over writing, because, from the very first jottings, without the reader a text is mute. This is the secret reading of the old Latin tag, *scripta manent, verba volant*, “the written words remain, the spoken words fly” – that is to say, “the written words remain mute on the page until the tongue gives them wings.”

So important is the role of the reader in the realm of the written word, that in ancient Mesopotamia, those privileged to learn the craft were called “scribes”, not “readers”, as if to hide from the crowd their main and powerful function. Because the power of the reader can reveal, can renew, can steer a text away from official guidelines, it has long been feared by literate societies. Through reading we learn to question authority and demand constant re-interpretation of traditional rules.

The power of writers is also feared, because, obviously, in societies of the book, without them there would be no texts from which the readers could react, no source of *contestation*, no reservoir of memory. Writers are the cornerstone on which our societies of the book are built. Doris Lessing, exhausted by the constant demeaning of her craft, exhorted her fellow writers to repeat, “as often as you can, ““Without me the literary industry would not exist: the publishers, the agents, the sub-agents, the sub-sub-agents, the accountants, the libel lawyers, the departments of literature, the professors, the theses, the books of criticism, the reviewers, the book pages—all this vast and proliferating edifice is because of this small, patronized, put-down and underpaid person.” To this person, the reader lends something like a humble immortality.

Somewhere in this vast and proliferating and (let us not forget) precarious edifice is then the office we have chosen, we who love books. You who have chosen the publishing career must move through it, as go-betweens for the reader and the writer. This was never an easy task, and with time it has become increasingly difficult and perilous. One thing a life among books can promise is the pleasure of difficulty.

In the beginning, five thousand years ago, there were no publishers. The writer wrote what he wanted to communicate on a piece of clay; the reader picked up the piece of clay and read. That was all. With one simple ritual, time and space were eliminated. The writer could be miles away from the reader, the reader centuries away from the writer: the text was everpresent, and remained in a suspended state of animation until the reader willed it into life. The patron saint of this literary exchange is Lazarus.

Writing was born in Mesopotamia, but different forms of writing evolved later in different places and at different times. Several millennia after the Mesopotamian invention, the pre-Inca people in Peru would mark beans with dots or lines to send their messages; in North America, the Iroquois developed a system of communication through patterns woven into their wampum belts; the Australian aborigines carved wooden canes with marks that the reader translated into warnings or announcements. Other forms of writing were more aleatory: Herodotus tells of a Scythian king who sent Darius a bird, a mouse, a frog and seven arrows: depending on the reader's interpretation, the message was either an offer of surrender (the mouse was the Scythians, the frog, their king, the bird, their horses, and the arrows, their arms) or a declaration of defiance (the arrows would kill the Persians if they did not hide like

mice, fly away like birds or leap in the water like frogs.) In every case, the meaning of the text is, up to a point, created by the reader. The narrower the semantic scope of the shared code, the closer its reading will be to the intended message. No other bridge is needed.

However, quite soon after the establishment of a system of writing shared by author and reader, a third party appeared who took on some of the functions and characteristics of both. In order better to copy, stock, preserve and distribute the text as tablet, scroll or later codex, the services of a third person were required, someone who would supposedly ease the relationship between reader and writer. In Mesopotamia, school-trained scribes acting as “editors” produced copies of certain texts, thus allowing for several readers to visit the same text at the same time; in Egypt, priests fulfilled this function, as well as preserving texts in some form of early archives; in Greece and Rome, writers engaged salesmen to copy their texts and distribute them to their clients. For many centuries the functions of these early “publishers” were also equivalent to those of latter-day printers and booksellers, multiplying the text and selling it. In all these cases, the service provided was an industrial or commercial one: for the most part, the publisher did not change or manipulate the text, except by mistake. The reader read what the writer wrote.

The function of the early publisher was essentially to serve the writer and the reader: to provide the former with a multiplier and distributor of his work, and the latter with material for consumption. If the publisher’s task was creative, it was within the frame of these activities: reproduction, distribution, provision. Except when the intermediary was also a scholar who could modify a text for philological reasons, (as when the librarians of Alexandria assumed a publishing role

and produced an edited edition of Homer, collating various versions in order to achieve something which they thought restored the correct original,) the publisher did not concern himself with either the fashioning of the text itself nor with its interpretation. It was, as I have said, a purely commercial transaction, undertaken for commercial reasons. No doubt some of the publishers loved the books they handled, no doubt a few of them were also writers in their spare time, no doubt a number of them (like the Alexandrian librarians) were keen readers. But their obligations were clearly limited and defined. I insist: the role of the publisher was that of a salesman, and it continued to be that until well into the nineteenth century.

Then things changed. The economic model applied since the Industrial Revolution to most technologies and most forms of commerce, to produce goods at the lowest possible cost for the highest possible profit, reached in the late 1800s the realm of the book. To achieve this goal, the greater part of the book industry, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, developed a team of specialists charged with determining which books would be produced based on a supposedly mathematical forecast of which books would sell. From the strategist of editorial marketing departments to the buyer for the larger bookstore chains, and also, perhaps less consciously aware of their responsibility, editors and creative-writing teachers, almost every member of the book industry became, to a large extent, part of a production line for the creation of artifacts for an audience not of readers (in the traditional sense) but of consumers. Certainly, many who were moved, as we are, by a love of books to enter the industry, remained stubbornly faithful to that calling, but they did so in spite of strong pressure, especially within the larger publishing groups, to consider the book above all as a saleable object.

Though there are, of course, publishers who have succeeded in retaining their literary integrity, more and more publishing decisions are deferred to marketing departments and to the buyers for chain bookshops and, as a consequence, critical self-censorship and commercial considerations creep with increasing frequency into the editorial realm.

The strategies of the industry are blatant and self-referential. In the film version of *The Devil Wears Prada*, based on one of these books produced on a specific model (the model known as "chick lit") and marketed accordingly, the main evil character, the fashion mogul Miranda Priestly, says to the innocent heroine who refuses to bend to the "fashion mentality", that the colour of the dress she's wearing, bought no doubt at an ordinary supermarket, is the result of careful fashion planning a season earlier; that is to say, that the dictates of commercial dogma are made to impregnate so deeply the fabric of society that no strand remains unaffected, and even though we might consciously refuse to follow the day's fashion, we will nevertheless become "slaves to the system".

This is a self-fulfilling truth. The book industry not only produces this dogma but also makes sure that very little place is accorded to anything outside it. Bookstore chains sell their window-space and display tables to the highest bidder, so that what the public sees is what the publisher pays for. In consequence, piles of announced bestsellers occupy most of the physical space available in a bookstore, all carrying an implicit "sell-by" date, like eggs, that ensures a continuous production. Book supplements, forced by a general newspaper policy of addressing supposedly low-brow readers, accord more and more space to those same "fast-food" books, thereby creating the impression that "fast food" books are as worthy as any old-fashioned classic, or that the readers are not

intelligent enough to enjoy "good" literature. This last point is all-important: the industry must educate us in stupidity, because readers don't come by stupidity naturally. On the contrary, we come into the world as intelligent creatures, curious and avid for instruction. It takes immense time and effort, individually and collectively, to dull and eventually stifle our intellectual and aesthetic capabilities, our creative perception and our use of language.

Paradoxically, it is this very rich nature of language that allows for it to be co-opted, to be reduced to dogma or, on the contrary, to flourish as literature. The perceived communality of language, its implied share of meanings, the cumulative effects created by successive interpretations, render a text susceptible to rulings of many kinds. Any great book incorporates into its pages all previous readings, so that, after a first incursion, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* disarms its own surprise ending, assimilates its conclusion into its beginning, rewrites itself in the reader's mind with a mass of comments and glosses that have sprung up since its first publication, so that we can no longer read Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* but the *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as read by the Victorians, by its pre- and post-Freudian audience, by modernists and post-modernists, and so on into the future. The only way to stop this geometrically progressive reading would be to freeze the text in one single authoritarian moment, declaring, as if it were God's word, on pain of some terrible punishment, that no variations will be allowed. But instead of promoting books of breadth and depth, for the most part the publishing industry of our time creates one-dimensional objects, books that are surface only and that don't allow readers the possibility of exploration.

Obviously there are countless writers who refuse to work according to formulae, and some who succeed in doing so, but much of what is being produced by the larger publishing companies today follows the set industrial model. A large portion of the reading public is therefore trained to expect a certain kind of "comfortable" book and, what is far more noxious, to read in a certain "comfortable" way, looking for short descriptions, patterns of dialogue copied from television sitcoms, familiar brand names, and plots that may follow convoluted entanglements but never allow for complexity or ambiguity.

The German philosopher Axel Honneth, using a term coined by Georg Lukács, calls this process "reification." By "reification," Lukács meant the colonization of the world of experience by means of one-dimensional generalisations derived from the rules of commercial exchange: granting value and identity not through imaginative stories but merely according to what something is said to cost and how much someone is willing to pay for it. This commercial fetishism covers all fields of human activity, including consciousness itself, and lends human labour and industrial commodities a sort of illusory autonomy, so that we become their subservient onlookers. Honneth extended this concept to embrace our conceptions of the other, of the world and of ourselves, that is to say, a view of society that sees humans and their realm not as living entities but as things or quantities lacking singular identities. For Honneth, the most serious of these concepts is that of "auto-reification," exemplified in the way we present ourselves to others in activities as diverse as job interviews, company-training programmes, virtual-sex chat-sites on the Web and role-playing video games. I would add to these the passive reading habits that deny our own intelligence and make us accept that the only stories we deserve are those pre-digested for us.

In the world of the book, this process of "reification" takes place by means of an industrial manipulation known in English as the editing process. Implanted in all English-language publishing companies since the early twentieth century, and uncommon in all other languages (though the system is filtering in because of the influence of the English market throughout the world,) the industrialized editing process is built upon several fallacies denounced in Honneth's argument. Among them, the most dangerous one assumes that a literary text is "perfectible": that is to say, that writing must aspire to a kind of Platonic archetype, an ideal model of literary text. It follows then that this ideal can be attained with the help of a specialist, an editor acting as tuner or mechanic who can "perfect" the text through professional reading skills. A literary creation is thus considered not an intrinsic "work-in-progress," never closed, never definitive, arrested at the moment of publication ("We publish to stop revising," declared the Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes,) but as a more or less all-rounded product initiated by the writer, finished off by an editor and approved by various specialists in marketing and sales. Anthony Burgess, in a review of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, complained about this editing procedure: "I think that the Anglo-American publishing tradition needs, at this point, to be taken to task. The editor who lacks the creative gift but is compensated with artistic taste has been overmuch lauded. Some of us would like to know what Thomas Wolfe wrote before Maxwell Perkins got hold of him, or what *Catch-22* was like before the editorial finesse of the former editor of *The New Yorker* licked it into shape. Editors never emend orchestral scores or panoramic paintings; why should the novelist be singled out as the one artist who doesn't understand his art?"

Of course, every writer has his or her homegrown editor: a spouse, a friend, or even a professional editor may have acquired, over time, the writer's trust as someone whose opinion the writer can measure, and choose to follow or set aside. And a fair number of professional editors, in the midst of ever-increasing constraints, courageously continue to try to work in service of the writer, not the industry, helping the author understand the work more clearly and achieve a book with fewer failings. The work of such editors seems even more remarkable when we consider that they battle against the demands of the large industrial conglomerates to produce industrially-efficient quick-selling literature which equates difficulty with lack of skill, demands resolutions to each fictional situation and affirmations to every imaginative doubt, presents a fully understandable image of the world from which all complexities have been eliminated and for which no new learning is required, offering in its place a state of mindless "happiness".

This literature exists in every genre, from sentimental fiction to the bloodthirsty thriller, from the historical romance to mystical claptrap, from true confessions to the realistic drama. It confines "saleable" literature firmly to the realm of entertainment, of relaxation, of pastime, and therefore of that which is socially superfluous and ultimately unessential. It infantilizes both writers and readers by making the former believe that their creations must be licked into shape by someone who knows better, and by convincing the latter that they are not clever enough to read more intelligent and complex narrations. In the book industry today, the larger the targeted audience, the more obediently the writer is expected to follow the instructions of editors and booksellers (and lately of literary agents as well), allowing them to decree not only practical copyediting changes of fact and grammar, but also of plot, character,

setting and title. In the meantime, books that were earlier considered not abstruse and academic but merely intelligent, are published now mainly by university presses and small companies with heroic budgets. The controller in Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* explains these tactics succinctly: “that’s the price we have to pay for stability. You’ve got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We’ve sacrificed the high art.”

The Dutch doctor Bernard de Mandeville, who set up his practice in England in the early eighteenth century, published in 1714 an essay he called *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits*, in which he argued that the system of mutual assistance which allows society, like a beehive, to function, feeds on the honeyed passion of consumers who love to acquire what they don't need. A virtuous society, Mandeville maintained, in which only the basic requirements must be satisfied, would have neither trade nor culture, and therefore collapse for want of employment. The consumer society that came fully into being almost two centuries later, took Mandeville's sarcastic arguments literally. Flattering the senses, valuing possession over worth or need, it turned the notion of value on its head: value, according to the codes of advertising, became not the worth of an object nor a service measured in its practice, but a perception based on how extensively the service or object was promoted and under what brand name. In the consumer world, Berkeley's *esse est percipi* has a different meaning. Perception is at the root of being, but things acquire value not because they need to exist but because they are perceived as being needed. Desire becomes then not the source but the end-product of consumption.

Into this state of reification it is difficult to maintain a clear perception of what drove us, lovers of the printed word, to it in the first place, to remember our initial and overwhelming passion. How to maintain a certain dignity, a clear conscience, a conduct that does not betray our ideals in a book industry that seems to have reverted to its roots, and turned the art of writing once again into a tool for accountants? No doubt with great difficulty, because, of course, what is happening in the realm of the book is what is happening in the rest of the world where, in spite of a greater consciousness of our responsibility in a number of areas (human rights, global warming, the disappearance of species), we continue to foster an economic model that has proven not merely inefficient but devastatingly noxious. The book and its artisans are only a part of this infernal machinery.

However, I believe that in spite of these increasingly bleak circumstances, there is something we can do. We can be faithful to our love. Today, when it has become more and more difficult to find a job and keep it, and to work in what we like without betraying our convictions, the whole range of workers in the publishing industry, that whole edifice described by Doris Lessing, is faced with a difficult choice: to accept directives that we know will demean even more the books we publish, or to circumvent these directives with subversive strategies. Most of the time, such strategies will seem impossible to implement, most of the time we will be forced to comply with inane orders to produce books that we know are garbage, but a few times, here and there, we may succeed. Small publishing companies are developing prestigious lists culled from what the larger companies now refuse to publish; university presses are changing their academic standards to bring under their imprint writers who used to be considered mainstream; the Web is providing an

outlet for books (both good and bad) that have no hope of being published in a more traditional manner. There are always strategies against stupidity and greed, however minimal and almost unnoticeable these may be, and we need to practice them whenever we can, or lose our own humanity.

Shakespeare, whose works required the perspicacity of a friendly editor, Ben Jonson, to reach their future readers, was aware that our predicament is part of a much vaster sickness, an appetite for material gain that ignores every other value, including our own lives: “an universal wolf”(he called it) “So doubly seconded with will and power,/Must make perforce an universal prey,/ And last eat up itself.” Your task is to see that this does not happen. With the increased advances of the electronic technology, new dangers arise to threaten our intellectual freedom, but also new ways of escape and new manners of survival. You can discover them and use them. Your love of books will teach you how, as it has always taught us. Above all, remember that you are readers.

Virginia Woolf, who was a publisher as well as an author, wrote that she had “sometimes dreamt that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards –their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble—the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, ‘Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them. They have loved reading.’”