

THE USES OF READING

"There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."
"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter V

"Why should we have libraries filled with books?" asked a smiling young futurologist at a recent library convention. (Futurologists, for those who don't read science-fiction, is a branch of electronics that forecasts future technologies and their prospective uses.) "Why waste valuable space to store endless masses of printed text that can be easily enclosed in a minuscule and resilient chip? Why force readers to travel all the way to a library, wait to find out if the book they want is there and, if it is, lug it back to keep for a limited time only?"

Why deny readers access to thousands of titles that their nearest library doesn't hold? Why yield to the threats of acid corrosion, brittle bindings, fading ink, moths, mice and worms, theft, fire and water, when all of Alexandria can be had at your fingertips from the comfort of any place you choose? The truth is that reading as we knew it is no longer a universal necessity, and libraries should relinquish those noble but antiquated receptacles of text we call books and adopt once and for all the electronic text, as they once relinquished clay tablets and parchment scrolls in favour of the codex. Accept the inevitable: the age of Gutenberg has come to an end."

Unfortunately, or fortunately, the paraphrase I've given is based on a misconception. The notion of a scattered library reborn in all its richness wherever a reader might find himself has a certain Pentecostal loveliness, each reader receiving, like the fire that rained on the apostles from heaven, the gift of numberless tongues. But just as a certain text is never expressed identically in different tongues, books and electronic memories, like electronic memories and the memories we hold in our mind, are different creatures and possess different natures, even when the text they carry is the same. As I argued in "St Augustine's Computer," they are instruments of particular kinds and their qualities serve diverse purposes in our attempt to know the world. Therefore, any opposition that forces us to eliminate one of them is worse than false: it is useless. To be able to find, in seconds, a half-remembered quotation from Statius or to be able to read at a moment's notice a recondite letter from Plato, is something almost anyone can do today, without the erudition of St Jerome, thanks to the electronic technology. But to be able to retire with a dog-eared book, revisiting familiar haunts and scribbling on the margins over previous annotations, comforted by paper and ink, is something almost anyone should

still be able to do, thanks to the persistence of the codex. Each technology has its own merits, and therefore, it may be more useful to leave aside this crusading view of the electronic word vanquishing the printed one, and explore instead each technology according to its particular merits.

Perhaps it is in the nature of traditional libraries that, unlike the human brain, the container is less ambitious than the contents. We are told that the cerebral neurons are capable of much more knowledge than however much information we store in them, and that, in the maze of our lobes, many of the immeasurable shelves running along our secret corridors remain empty for the whole of our lives -- causing librarians to lose their proverbial composure and seethe with righteous envy. From birth to death, we accumulate words and images, emotions and sensations, intuitions and ideas, compiling our memory of the world, and however much we believe that we cram our minds with experience, there will always be space for more, as in one of those ancient parchments known as palimpsests, on which new texts were written over the old ones, again and again. "What is the human brain," asked Charles Baudelaire in 1869, "but an immense and natural palimpsest?" Like Baudelaire's almost infinite palimpsest, the library of the mind has no discernable limits. In the libraries of stone and glass, however, in those storerooms of the memory of society, space is always lacking, and in spite of bureaucratic restraint, reasoned selection, lack of funds and willful or accidental destruction, there is never enough room for the books we wish to keep. To remedy this constraint, thanks to our technical skills, we have set up virtual libraries for whom space approaches infinity. But even these electronic arks cannot rescue for posterity more than certain forms of the text itself. In those ghostly libraries, the concrete incarnation of the text is left behind, and the flesh of the word has no existence.

Virtual libraries have their advantages, but that does not mean that solid libraries are no longer needed, however hard the electronic industry may try to convince us of the contrary, however hard Google and its brethren may present themselves as philanthropical entities and not as exploiters of our intellectual patrimony. The World Digital Library, an international library supported both by Unesco and by the U.S. Library of Congress, the Bibliothèque de France, and other national libraries, is a colossal and important undertaking, and even though part of the funding comes from Google, it is (for the time being) free from commercial concerns. However, even when such remarkable virtual libraries are being built, traditional libraries are still of the essence. An electronic text is one thing, the identical text in a printed book is another, and they are not interchangeable, any more than a recorded line can replace a line embedded in an individual memory. Context, material support, the physical history and experience of a text are part of the text, as much as its vocabulary and its music. In the most literal sense, matter is not immaterial.

And the problems of traditional libraries --biased selection and subjective labeling, hierarchical cataloguing and its implied censorship, archival and circulating duties-- continue to be, in any society that deems itself literate, essential problems. The library of the mind is haunted by the knowledge of all the books we'll never read and will therefore never rightfully call ours; the collective memorial libraries are haunted by all the books that never made it into the circle of the librarians' elect: books rejected, abandoned, restricted, despised, forbidden, unloved, ignored.

Following this pendular motion that rules our intellectual life, one same question seems to tick away repeatedly, addressed both to the reader who despairs at the lack of time and to the society of readers who despair at the lack of space: to what purpose do we read? What is the reason for wanting to know more, for reaching towards the ever-retreating horizon of our intellectual exploring? Why collect the booty of such adventures in the vaults of our stone libraries and in our electronic memories? Why do it at all? The question asked by the keen futurologist can be deepened and, rather than wonder why is reading coming to an end? (a self-fulfilling assumption) we might ask instead: "What is the end of reading?"

Perhaps a personal example may help examine the question.

Two weeks before Christmas 2008, I was told that I needed an urgent operation, so urgent in fact that I had no time to pack. I found myself lying in a pristine emergency room, uncomfortable and anxious, with no books except for the one I had been reading that morning, Cees Nooteboom's delightful *In the Dutch Mountains*, which I finished in the next few hours. To spend the following fourteen days convalescing in hospital without any reading material seemed to me a torture too great to bear, so when my partner suggested getting from my library a few books, I seized the opportunity gratefully. But which books did I want?

The author of *Ecclesiastes* and Pete Seeger have taught us that for everything there is a season; likewise, I might add, for every season there is a book. But readers have learned that not just any book is suited to any occasion. Pity the soul who finds itself with the wrong book in the wrong place, like poor Roald Amundsen, discoverer of the South Pole, whose book-bag sank under the ice, so that he was constrained to read, night after freezing night, the only surviving volume: Dr John Gauden's indigestible *Portrait of His Sacred Majesty in His Solitudes and Sufferings*. Readers know that there are books for reading after love-making and books for waiting in the airport lounge, books for the breakfast table and books for the bathroom, books for sleepless nights at home and books for sleepless days in the hospital. No one, not even the best of readers, can fully explain why certain books are right for certain occasions and why others are not.

In some ineffable way, like human beings, occasions and books mysteriously agree or clash with one another.

Why, at certain moments in our life, do we choose the companionship of one book over another? The list of titles Oscar Wilde requested in Reading Gaol included Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and a French-Italian conversation primer. Alexander the Great went on his campaigns with a copy of Homer's *Iliad*. John Lennon's murderer thought it fit to carry J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* when planning to commit his crime. Do astronauts take Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* on their journeys or, on the contrary, do they prefer André Gide's *Les nourritures terrestres*? During Mr. Bernard Madoff's prison sentence, will he demand Dickens' *Little Dorrit* to read how the embezzler Mr. Merdle, unable to bear the shame of being found out, cuts his throat with a borrowed razor? Pope Benedict XIII, will he retire to his studiolo in the Castello Sant'Angelo with a copy of *Bubu de Montparnasse* by Charles-Louis Philippe, to study how the lack of condoms provoked a syphilis epidemic in nineteenth-century Paris? The practical G. K. Chesterton imagined that, if stranded on a desert island, he'd want to have with him a simple shipbuilding manual; under the same circumstances, the less practical Mohamed Darwish preferred Borges's *Ficciones*.

And I, what books would I choose best to keep me company in my hospital cell?

Though I believe in the obvious usefulness of a virtual library, I'm not a user of e-books, those modern incarnations of the Assyrian tablets, nor of the Lilliputian i-pods, nor the nostalgic game-boys. I believe, as Ray Bradbury put it, that "the Internet is a big distraction." I'm accustomed to the space of a page and the solid flesh of paper and ink. I made therefore a mental inventory of the books piled by my bed at home. I discarded recent fiction (too risky because yet unproven), biographies (too crowded under my circumstances: hooked to a tangle of drips, I found other people's presence in my room annoying), scientific essays and detective novels (too cerebral: much as I'd recently been enjoying the Darwinian renaissance and re-reading classic crime stories, I felt that a detailed account of selfish genes and the criminal mind would not be the right medicine.) I toyed with the idea of startling the nurses with Kirkegaard's *Pain and Suffering: The Sickness Unto Death*. But no: what I wanted was the equivalent of comfort food, something I'd once enjoyed and could repeatedly and effortlessly revisit, something that could be read for pleasure alone but that would, at the same time, keep my brain alight and humming. I asked my partner to bring me my two volumes of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*.

Lars Gustafsson, in his moving novel *Death of a Beekeeper*, has his narrator, Lars Lennart Westin, who is dying of cancer, make a list of art forms according to their level of difficulty. Foremost are the erotic arts, followed by music,

poetry, drama and pyrotechnics, and ending with the arts of building fountains, fencing and artillery. But one art form cannot be fitted in: the art of bearing pain. "We are therefore dealing with a unique art form whose level of difficulty is so high," says Westin, "that no one exists who can practise it." Westin, perhaps, had not read Don Quixote. Don Quixote is, I discovered with relief, the perfect choice for bearing pain. Opening it almost anywhere, while waiting to be prodded and pinched and drugged, the friendly voice of the erudite Spanish soldier comforted me with its reassurance that all would be well in the end. Because ever since my adolescence, I've kept going back to Don Quixote, I knew I wasn't going to be tripped up by the prodigious surprises of its plot. And, since Don Quixote is a book that can be read just for the pleasure of its invention, simply for the sake of the story, without any obligation of studiously analysing its conundrums and rhetorical digressions, I could allow myself to drift peacefully away in the narrative flow, following the noble knight and his faithful Sancho. To my first high school reading of Don Quixote, guided by professor Isaias Lerner, I have, over the years, added many other readings, in all sorts of places and all sorts of moods. I read Don Quixote during my early years in Europe, when the echoes of May 68 seemed to announce huge changes into something still unnamed and undefined, like the idealized world of chivalry that the honest knight seeks on his quest. I read Don Quixote in the South Pacific, trying to raise a family on an impossibly small budget, feeling a little mad in the alien Polynesian culture, like the poor knight among the aristocrats. I read Don Quixote in Canada, where the country's multicultural society seemed to me appealingly quixotic in tone and style. To these readings, and many others, I can now add a medicinal Don Quixote, both as a balm and a consolation.

None of these Don Quixotes can be found, of course, in any library, except in the one kept by my diminishing memory. Karel Capek, in his wonderful book on gardens, says that the art of gardening can be reduced to one rule: you put into it more than you take out. The same can be said of the art of libraries. But the libraries of the material world, however great their hunger, can only hoard existing volumes. We know that every book holds within it all its possible readings, past, present and future, but its Pythagorean reincarnations, those wonderful forms which depend on readers to come, will not be found on our shelves. Paul Masson, a friend of Colette who worked at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, noticed that the vast stocks of the library were defective in Latin and Italian books of the fifteenth century, and so began adding invented titles on the official index cards to save, he said, "the catalogue's prestige." When Colette naïvely asked him what was the use of books that didn't exist, Masson responded indignantly that he couldn't be expected "to think of everything!" But librarians must, and wishful thinking cannot, unfortunately, be granted room in a seriously run institution.

In the library of the mind, however, books that have no material existence constantly cram the shelves: books that are the amalgamation of other books once read and now only imperfectly remembered, books that annotate, gloss and comment others too rich to stand on their own, books written in dreams or in nightmares and that now preserve the tone of those nebulous realms, books that we know should exist but which have never been written, autobiographical books of unspeakable experiences, books of unutterable desires, books of once obvious and now forgotten truths, books of magnificent and inexpressible invention. All editions of Don Quixote published to date in every language can be collected -- are collected, for instance, in the library of the Instituto Cervantes in Madrid. But my own Don Quixotes, the ones that correspond to each of my several readings, the ones invented by my memory and edited by my oblivion, can only find a place in the library of my mind.

At times both libraries coincide. In chapter six of the First Part of Don Quixote, the knight's library of solid books overlaps with the remembered library of the priest and the barber who purge it; every volume taken off the shelves is echoed in the recalled reading of its censors and is judged according to its past merits. Both the books condemned to the flames and the books that are spared depend not on the words printed black on white in their pages, but on the words stored in the minds of the barber and the priest, placed there when they first became the books' readers. Sometimes their judgment depends on hearsay, as when the priest explains that he has heard that the *Amadís de Gaula* was the first novel of chivalry printed in Spain and therefore, as fountainhead of such evil, it must burn -- to which the barber retorts that he has heard that it's also the best, and that for that reason it must be forgiven. Sometimes the prior impression is so strong that it damns not only the book itself but also its companions; sometimes the translation is condemned but the original is spared; sometimes a few are not sent to the fire but merely removed, so as not to affect their future readers. The priest and the barber, attempting to cleanse Don Quixote's library, are in fact molding it to the image of the library they themselves bear in mind, appropriating the books and turning them into whatever their own experience made them up to be. It is not surprising that, in the end, the room in which the library is lodged is itself walled up, so that it appears never to have existed, and when the old knight wakes and asks to see it, he's told that it has simply vanished. Vanished it has, but not through the magic of an evil wizard (as Don Quixote suggests) but through the power granted other readers of superimposing their own versions of a book onto the books owned by someone else. Every library of the solid world depends on the readings of those who came before us.

Ultimately, this creative hermeneutics defines the reader's supreme power: to make of a book whatever one's experience, taste, intuition and knowledge dictate. Not just anything, of course, not the concoctions of a raving mind -- even though psychoanalysts and surrealists suggest that these too have their

validity and logic. But rather the intelligent and inspired reconstruction of the text, using reason and imagination as best we can to translate it onto a different canvas, extending the horizon of its apparent meaning beyond its visible borders and the declared intentions of the author. The limits of this power are painfully vague: Umberto Eco suggested that they must coincide with the limits of common sense. Perhaps this arbitration is enough.

Limitless or not, the power of the reader cannot be inherited; it must be learned. Even though we come into the world as creatures intent on seeking meaning in everything, in reading meanings in gestures, sounds, colours and shapes, the deciphering of society's common code of communication is a skill that must be acquired. Vocabulary and syntax, levels of meaning, summary and comparison of texts, all these are techniques that must be taught to those who enter society's commonwealth in order to grant them the full power of reading. And yet, the last step in the process must be learnt all alone: discovering in a book the record of one's own experience.

Rarely, however, is the acquisition of this power encouraged. From the elite schools of scribes in Mesopotamia to the monasteries and universities of the Middle Ages, and later, with the wider distribution of texts after Gutenberg and in the age of the Web, reading at its fullest has always been the privilege of a few. True: in our time, most people in the world are superficially literate, able to read an ad and sign their name on a contract, but that alone does not make them readers. Reading is the ability to enter a text and explore it to one's fullest individual capacities, repossessing it in the act of reinvention. But a myriad obstacles (as I mentioned in my essay on Pinocchio) are placed in the way of its accomplishment. Precisely because of the power that reading grants the reader, the various political, economic and religious systems that govern us fear such imaginative freedom. Reading, at its best, may lead to reflection and questioning, and reflection and questioning may lead to objection and change. That, in any society, is a dangerous enterprise.

Librarians today are increasingly faced with a bewildering problem: users of the library, especially the younger ones, no longer know how to read competently. They can find and follow an electronic text, they can cut paragraphs from different Internet sources and recombine them into a single piece, but they seem unable to comment and criticize and gloss and memorize the sense of a printed page. The electronic text, in its very accessibility, lends users the illusion of appropriation without the attendant difficulty of learning. The essential purpose of reading becomes lost to them, and all that remains is the collecting of information, to be used when required. But reading is not achieved merely by having a text made available: it demands that its readers enter the maze of words, cut open their own tracks and draw their own charts beyond the margins of the page. Of course, an electronic text allows this, but its very vaunted

inclusiveness makes it difficult to fathom a specific meaning and thoroughly explore specific pages. The text on the screen doesn't render the reader's task as obvious as the text in a material book, limited by its borders and binding. "Get anything," reads the ad for a mobile phone able to photograph, record voices, search the Web, transmit words and images, receive and send messages and, of course, phone. But "anything" in this case stands dangerously near "nothing." The acquisition of something (rather than anything) always requires selection, and cannot rely on a limitless offer. To observe, to judge, to choose requires training, as well as a sense of responsibility, even an ethical stance. And young readers, like travellers who have only learned to drive automatic cars, no longer seem able to shift gears at will, relying instead on a vehicle that promises to take them everywhere.

At some point in our history, after the invention of a code that could be communally written and read, it was discovered that the words, set down in clay or papyrus by an author perhaps distant both in time and in space, could be not only whatever the common code proclaimed, say a number of goats for sale or a proclamation of war. It was discovered that those goats, invisible to the senses of those who now read them, became the goats of the reader's experience, goats perhaps once seen on the family farm, or demon goats glimpsed in a haunting dream. And that the proclamation of war could be read not merely as a call to arms, but perhaps as a warning, or as an appeal for negotiation, or as bravado. The text inscribed was the product of a particular will and intelligence, but the reading of that text did not need subserviently to follow, or even attempt to guess, the originating intelligence and will.

At that point, what readers discovered was that the instrument in which their society chose to communicate, the language of words, uncertain and vague and ambiguous, found its strength precisely in that ambiguity and vagueness and imprecision, in its miraculous ability to name without confining the object to the word. In writing "goats" or "war," the author meant no doubt something absolutely specific, but the reader was now able to add to that specificity the reflections of vast herds and the echoes of a possible peace. Every text, because it is made out of words, says what it has to say and also volumes more than its author could never have conceived, volumes that future readers will compile and collect, sometimes as solid texts that in turn will breed others, sometimes as texts written half awake and half asleep, fluid texts, shifting texts hoarded in the library of the mind.

In the thirty-second chapter of the First Part of Don Quixote, the innkeeper, who has given the exhausted hero a bed for the night, argues with the priest about the merits of novels of chivalry, saying that he's unable to see how such books could make anyone lose his mind.

"I don't know how that can be," explains the innkeeper, "since, as I understand it, there's no better reading in the world, and over there I have two or three of these novels, together with some other papers, which, I truly believe, have preserved not only my life but also that of many others; for, in harvest time, a great number of reapers come here, and there's always one who can read, and who takes one of these books in his hands, and more than thirty of us gather around him, and we sit there listening to him with such pleasure that it makes us all grow young again."

The innkeeper himself favours battle scenes; a local whore prefers stories of romantic courtship; the innkeeper's daughter likes best of all the lamentations of the knights when absent from their ladies. Each listener (each reader) translates the text into his or her own experience and desire, effectively taking possession of the story which, for the censoring priest causes readers like Don Quixote to go mad, but which, according to Don Quixote himself, provides glowing examples of honest and just behaviour in the real world. One text, a multiplicity of readings, a shelf full of books derived from that one text read out loud, increasing at each turned page our hungry libraries, if not always those of paper, certainly those of the mind: that too has been my happy experience.

I'm deeply grateful to my Don Quixote. Over the two hospital weeks, the twin volumes kept vigil with me: they talked to me when I wanted entertainment, or waited quietly, attentively, by my bed. They never became impatient with me, neither sententious nor condescending. They continued a conversation begun ages ago, when I was someone else, as if they were indifferent to time, as if taking for granted that this moment too would pass, and their reader's discomfort and anxiety, and that only their remembered pages would remain on my shelves, describing something of my own, intimate and dark, for which as yet I had no words.

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