

Moyra Davey

THE PROBLEM
OF
READING

Moyra Davey

THE PROBLEM OF READING

With images by

Moyra Davey, JoAnn Verburg, and James Welling

A DOCUMENTS BOOK

2003



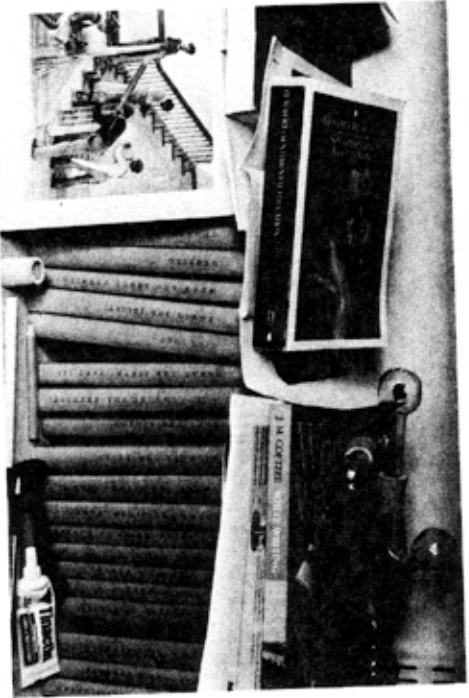
“What to read?” is a recurring dilemma in my life. The question always conjures up an image: a woman at home, half-dressed, moving restlessly from room to room, picking up a book, reading a page or two and no sooner feeling her mind drift, telling herself, “You should be reading something else, you should be doing something else.” The image also has a mise-en-scène: overstuffed, disorderly shelves of dusty and yellowing books, many of them unread; books in piles around the bed or faced down on a table; work prints of photographs, also with a faint covering of dust, taped to the walls of the studio; a pile of bills; a sink full of dishes. She is trying to concentrate on the page in front of her but a distracting blip in her head travels from one desultory scene to the next, each one competing for her attention. It is not just a question of which book will absorb her, for there are plenty that will do that, but rather, which book, in a nearly cosmic sense, will choose her, redeem her. Often what is at stake, should she want to spell it out, is the idea that something is missing, as in: what is the crucial bit of urgently needed knowledge that will save her, at least for this day? She has the idea that if she can simply plug into the right book then all will be calm, still, and right with the world.

About a year ago I wrote to a friend, the Canadian writer Alison Strayer, and asked rhetorically, since I found it hard to imagine that she might share my dilemma: Do you ever get this

frantic feeling about what to read? Alison wrote back:

It is a big ongoing Issue in my life. One is in a state of temporary grace while working hard on a single project, for a deadline--reading doesn't quite come up as an immediate issue. It seems that when one has answered the question "what to read?" one has solved all the problems of restlessness, unfocus, and hunger of a certain sort, for a good long while. Because one [single] reading, if one is in a centered reading state, always contains the seeds of future readings. There is a true state of bliss one arrives at when one always knows what to read next. (And conversely, always a cause for concern when one doesn't know what to read.)

Alison's two-part answer started me thinking about the nature of reading and the nature of reading as work, specifically reading as creative work. The state of grace she refers to is produced by the writer's engrossment in a piece of writing (an essay that necessitates reading as research in her case). There is no time for self-doubt. One must simply absorb the material necessary to write the piece. Even if the writing project is not an essay but a story or novel, a writer must still read. She must ingest literature just as a car needs fuel. Stephen King in a recent memoir on writing wrote: "If you don't have time to read you don't have the time (or tools) to write." So reading in this manner is tied to productivity, to making something. Reading becomes part of a generative, creative cycle of taking in and putting out, with all of the rewards--the sense of balance, the sense of release--this process entails.



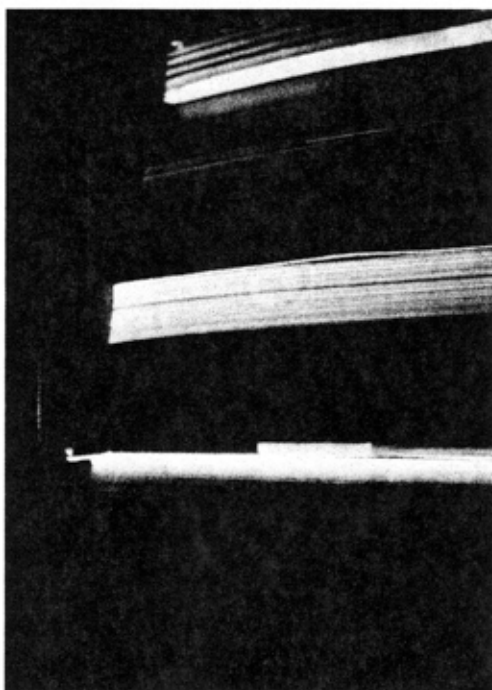
Moyra Davey

Georges Perec, the brilliantly inventive French novelist and essayist, wrote in his 1978 essay, "Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One's Books":

Like the librarians of Babel in Borges's story, who are looking for the book that will provide them with the key to all the others, we oscillate between the illusion of perfection and the vertigo of the unattainable. In the name of completeness, we would like to believe that a unique order exists that would enable us to accede to knowledge all in one go.

In the interest of approaching this utopian wish, so beautifully articulated by Perec, how are we to order and prioritize our reading, to figure out the key? In school, bibliographies and reading lists get generated easily enough. And there are times when we will simply drop everything to pick up a new book or article by a favorite author. But outside of these two circumstances, how do we choose what to read? Where do we locate value in reading and how do we define its pleasure? Is it in losing all sense of time and self to a page-turner, like the solitary novel reader ominously described by Walter Benjamin, who "swallows up the material as the fire devours logs in the fireplace"? Or is the real value of reading to be found in confrontation and in challenge, as Kafka famously said, as an "axe [to shatter] the frozen sea within us"?

Must reading be tied to productivity to be truly satisfying, as my friend Alison suggests? Or is it the opposite that it can only really gratify if it is a total escape? What is it that gives us a sense of sustenance and completion? Are we on some level

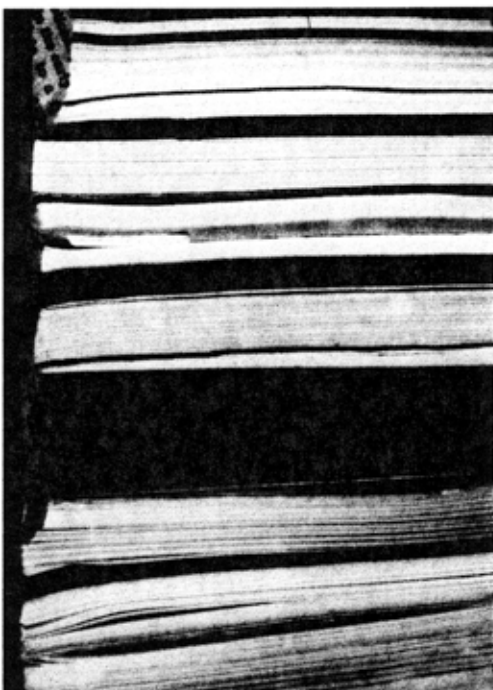


always striving to attain that blissful state of un-agendaced reading remembered from childhood? What does it mean to spend a good part of one's life absorbed in books? Given that our time is limited, the problem of reading becomes one of exclusion. Why pick one book over the hundreds, perhaps thousands on our bookshelves, the further millions in libraries and stores? For in settling on any book we are implicitly saying no to countless others. This conflict is aptly conjured up by essayist Lynne Sharon Schwartz as she reflects on "the many books (the many acts) I cannot in all decency leave unread (undone)—or can I?"

Italo Calvino, Italian novelist and author, in his labyrinthine meta-novel *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, a veritable catalogue of the art of reading, gives a hilarious account of a hapless reader making his way through a bookstore. Intent on getting his hands on the latest offering by a favored author, he is nonetheless full of misgivings as to the legitimacy of his choice. Here is an excerpt from the protagonist's litany of doubts:

[What of all] the Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages...the Books Dealing With Something You're Working On At The Moment...[the ones] That Fill You With Sudden Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily Justified...the Books Read Long Ago Which It's Now Time To Reread and the Books You've Always Pretended To Have Read And Now It's Time To Sit Down And Really Read Them[?]

I began my research into all these questions and doubts in



the usual way, by making lists and querying friends, by mining footnotes and following hunches, and, I will admit it, by taking recommendations from amazon.com. New piles grew up around the bedside and a reading program was launched, consisting of primarily essays, a small amount of fiction, and several books in a category that is clearly a genre of its own: the memoir of a life with books. And so it is no small irony that this essay, originating in the anxious question "What to read?" might possibly propel me into exactly that state of undoubting purposefulness, that state of grace and bliss that my friend Alison described.

But wait. Not so fast. This state of grace is at its height while reading a Virginia Woolf essay in the early morning with a first cup of coffee when no one else is awake, or, when seated before the computer, the muddle in my head manages to find a clear shape on the screen. But what about the day spent pouring over Harold Bloom, laboriously ticking off passages and transcribing them to my yellow pad along with page numbers, and feeling my own sense of agency dwindling under the weight of his relentless erudition. What pleasure is there in reading when the price to be paid is an axe hanging over your head, an essay to be produced? How to escape the little voice that says you cannot do this, you will fail? Where is the middle ground between absorption and anxiety, gratification and toil? Or is it simply that any creative project, especially writing, will always exact this price? Are the rewards of achievement always to be kept company by struggle and self-doubt? But wait again. I'm not even talking about reading anymore. I'm talking about writing.

During the time I was preparing this essay I often made a slip and said that I was working on an essay about writing rather than my true topic, reading. Obviously reading and writing are



connected. Jean-Paul Sartre and many other writers have said reading is writing, by which I understand that as readers we are always piecing together meaning and, in a sense, writing our own texts by weaving the threads and associations of previous readings and experiences. But by this I don't mean to suggest that reading and writing are one and the same—writing is infinitely harder. The central question I mean to pose is, what if the most gratifying reading is the one that also entails the risks of producing a text of one's own?

In her book *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey*, Janet Malcolm tells of Anton Chekhov, a man who wrote steadily and prolifically ("he was... writing something in his head all the time"), and whose published stories brought him celebrity and financial independence, saying poignantly towards the end of his life, cut short by tuberculosis at age forty-four: "If life is given only once it shouldn't be spent writing." He also began to intimate that "idleness [and fishing] are the only form[s] of happiness." Virginia Woolf would seem to conjure up a similar ambivalence about reading in her many essays on the subject. Several times in these essays, she situates her fictional reader by an open window, with her gaze shifting from open book to the idealized, pastoral scenes taking place outside, implicitly contrasting but also longingly connecting the solitariness of reading with the pull and engagement of the outside world.

Walter Benjamin underlines this kind of isolation in his essay "The Storyteller," in which he contrasts the alienation of the novel reader with the conviviality of storytelling, the latter an activity rooted in the social, in an oral tradition. Benjamin writes: "The reader of a novel... is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter



the words, for the benefit of a listener.)" Further, he adds this damning pronouncement: "What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with the death he reads about."

Writing demands detachment, seclusion. Following this, I wonder if the doubtful question that Chekhov raises of a life spent in solitude writing, might also be asked of reading: What does it mean to spend a good part of one's life alone in front of a book? And if this is our choice, how are we to go about it?

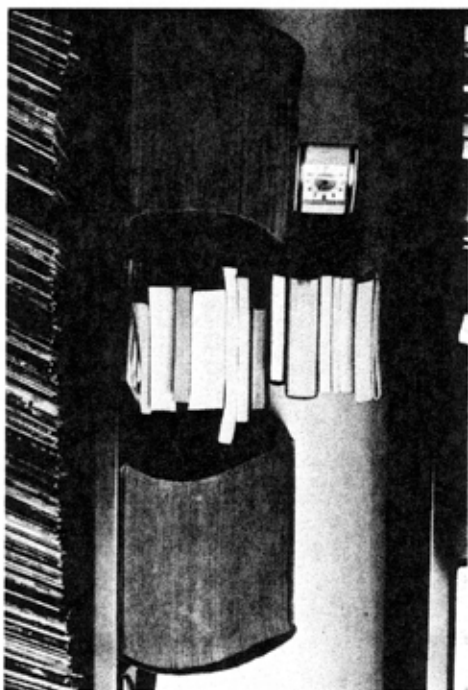
I will address the opinions, suggestions, advice, or, in certain cases the refusal to give advice, of a half dozen or so authors on the subject of reading: what, how, and why should we read? I began with a few favorite writers and a handful of essays, and I dutifully consulted the canonical voices on the subject. But beyond that, I feel it was not so much a question of myself making choices as books choosing me. This last comment speaks to a sense that I have, one that crops up frequently in the literature on reading, about the roles of randomness and chance in an individual's reading process. It is an idea that fascinates me and one I will come back to later on.

In many ways *how to read, what to read, and why read* are one and the same question, and there are writers who have made a career of addressing it, notably Harold Bloom, author of *The Western Canon, How to Read and Why*, and dozens of other books of literary criticism and commentary. A controversial figure, Bloom has spent a lifetime reading and is a passionate advocate of a program that places William Shakespeare at the center of the canon. For Bloom, all of life, including "the Freudian map of the mind," is contained and mirrored in Shakespeare. If we wish to understand ourselves and the world, to confront

mortality, to experience the sublime no less, we need look no further than the sixteenth-century playwright and poet to find that his words illuminate our modern dilemmas and preoccupations with prescient wisdom and accuracy. All of this is hard to disagree with, especially Bloom's insistence on reading the classics not to mold oneself into a better citizen but self-indulgently because these books are "strange, uncanny [and] weird."

Consistent with Bloom, Italo Calvino, in his inspiring collection titled *Why Read the Classics?*, writes: "A classic is a book which even when we read it for the first time gives the sense of rereading something we have read before." Like Bloom, Calvino is a proponent of difficult and demanding reading. But unlike Bloom, who reminds me a little of those psychoanalysts who still insist on at least four-days-a-week treatment schedules, Calvino has a sense of proportion and modulation. He acknowledges that the stresses of modern life may not exactly afford us those daily parcels of unhindered headspace conducive to hours of free association and disciplined reading. One can be "impatient...constantly irritated and dissatisfied," Calvino writes, and still find a place in one's life for Shakespeare, Beckett, and Conrad. Calvino recommends that we alternate reading contemporary works that "give us an understanding of our own times" with the classics, and further that we come to our own definition of what constitutes a classic. For Calvino, a classic is any book that "represent[s] the whole universe...on a par with ancient talismans...a book to which you cannot remain indifferent." Perhaps there is hope for a fidgety reader like myself who finds her most sustained reading is done in subway cars shooting through tunnels on the express track.

Years before Bloom and Calvino were publishing their



philosophies on reading. Virginia Woolf, in her essays and diaries, had already laid much of the groundwork for the thoughts they would later popularize. Reading constituted a huge part of Woolf's life. It was her greatest pleasure. It was also how she earned a living (partially, since she also had an inheritance), reviewing books for the *Times Literary Supplement* and other publications. In two important essays, "Hours in a Library," written in 1916, and the well known "How Should One Read a Book?" from 1926, Woolf laid out some of her core ideas about books and reading. A great proponent of voracious, indiscriminate reading, everything from "bad" contemporary novels to the forgotten memoirs and letters one discovers buried in secondhand bookstores, Woolf would concur with Calvino that to really appreciate the classics one must come at them from the vantage point of contemporary literature. It is only then that one can experience "a complete finality about [the classics]...a consecration [that]...we return to life, feeling it more keenly and understanding it more deeply than before."

Woolf famously said of reading: "The only advice...is to take no advice....follow your own instincts....use your own reason." A similar thought was voiced by her elder contemporary Oscar Wilde, who did not believe in recommending books, only in recommending them. Later, Jorge Luis Borges echoed the same sentiment by discouraging "systematic bibliographies" in favor of "adulterous" reading. More recently, Gregg Bordowitz has promoted "promiscuous" reading in which you impulsively allow an "imposter" book to overrule any reading trajectory you might have set for yourself, simply because, for instance, a friend tells you in conversation that he is reading it and is excited by it. This evokes for me that most potent kind of



reading—reading as flirtation with or eavesdropping on someone you love or desire, someone who figures in your fantasy life.

But getting back to Virginia Woolf. Despite her interdiction (“take no advice”), she does in fact have advice to offer. Noting “all the books jostle And outside the donkey brays,” she asks: “How are we to bring order into this multitudinous chaos and so get the . . . widest pleasure from what we read?” Woolf begins

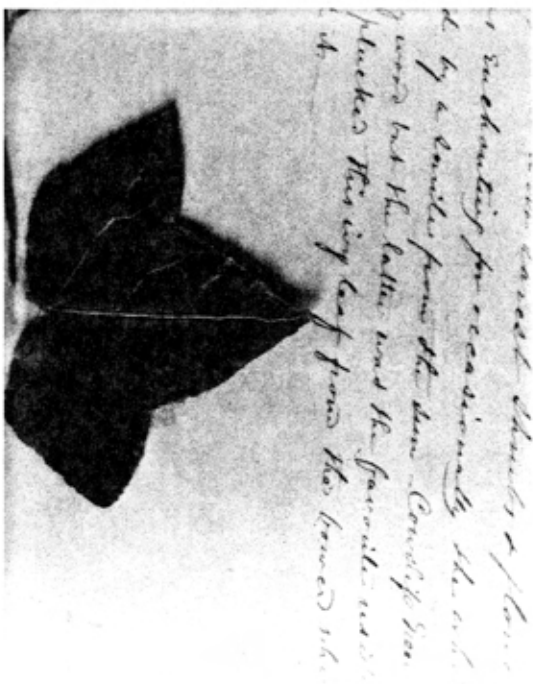
“How Should One Read a Book?” by delineating various genres: fiction, biography, poetry, and a category dear to her that she names “rubbish reading.” She proceeds in her inimitable way, conjuring up images of walks down city streets and through the byways of literary history, outlining the genres, their pleasures and virtues, and giving the most idiosyncratic advice for ways of savoring each category. For instance, she claims the best way to understand what a novelist is doing is not to read but to write: recall a scene from your life that has struck you in some way, she suggests, and put it to paper. See how easily the feelings you meant to transmit evade you. Now turn from your muddle (and here she is referring as much to her own hypothetical product as the reader’s) and read the opening pages of Austen, DeLoo, or Hardy, and you will be in no doubt as to their mastery, each conjuring up a world uncommonly vivid and unique.

“To read a novel is a difficult and complex art,” Woolf goes on to say, and we can sometimes be aided in our perceptions by all those books that are not great art and that, in fact, take up most of the space on library shelves—biographies and memoirs. Then Woolf again circles back to the reader as writer and suggests that the biography we have been reading with the aim of better understanding literature may actually stimulate our own creative powers, our own urge to record something of our lives.

Put the biography down, she recommends, and look out the window. Try your hand at recording the scene, "stimulating... in its unselfconsciousness, its irrelevance, its perpetual movement."

Woolf had a passion for the letters, diaries, and travel journals of ordinary men and women of bygone days. In "Street Haunting" her 1930 *flâneuse's* account of a twilight walk through the streets of London for the purpose of buying a pencil, she recounts stepping into a secondhand bookshop, the home of all the "wild" and undomesticated books, and pulling off of an upper shelf a faded little volume, a wool-merchant's chronicle of a business trip through Wales, written and self-published a hundred years prior. In an almost Proustian evocation of the serendipitous, sensory retrieval of memory—the idea that something buried and forgotten may be summoned to life once again through chance encounter—she describes how the chronicler "let flow... [into his account] the very scent of hollyhocks and the hay together with such a portrait of himself as gives him forever a seat in the warm corner of the mind's inglenook." These "relics of human life" constitute the "Tubish reading" to which Woolf is so devoted: "it may be one letter—but what a vision it gives! It may be a few sentences—but what vistas they suggest!" It is the "matter-of-factness," the unpremeditated quality of these writings that is key to Woolf's delectation of them. Like the Surrealists who seized on the evocative, hallucinatory power of the found-object, Woolf prized her chance literary finds and wrote of the paroxysms of pleasure they elicited with an intensity and craving of a gourmet.

(Roland Barthes, in his book *The Pleasure of the Text*, expresses



a similar appetite when reading biography for accounts of mundane things, such as the fluctuations of weather and other "petty details of daily life: schedules, habits, meals, lodging, clothing." Speculating on why he finds himself drawn in by these passages, Barthes proposes that it is because factual details, unlike someone's "insipid moral musings," retain their immediacy and relevance to our lives. Recorded in an almost unconscious manner, these passages allow us to insert ourselves into the scene, to feel interpolated by the text, perhaps a little in the way we are hooked by the *punctum* of a photograph.)

When Woolf is finally able to tear herself away from the rubbish heap of old letters and diaries, it is to read poetry, and, again invoking the writerly reader, she says, "the time to read poetry is when we are almost able to write it." (Elsewhere, in her diary, she inverts this statement to similar ends: "The most successful reading leaves me with the impulse to write it all over again," which reminds me again of Barthes. In another beautiful passage in *The Pleasure of the Text*, he says that his best ideas come to him in a sideways manner while in the presence of someone he loves, and that his most creative reading is oblique or distracted, when he is led to "look up often, to listen to something else." One could argue this is a doubtful sort of reading since the reader perhaps failed to connect with the writer. On the other hand, how can we object to a reading that is so generative, so capable of spawning the seeds of future texts? I might add, this oblique mode of reading is often how I read Barthes himself, with a sort of free-floating attentiveness to the page and a diffusion of consciousness that tends to set me thinking about my own work and ideas as much as his.)

Woolf concludes "How Should One Read a Book?" by exhort-



ing her readers, who heretofore have been told to be simply porous sponges and at one with the writer, to now conceptualize the book as a whole and to pass judgement upon it. As Woolf wrote in her memoir *Moments of Being* of her need to "make whole" the shocks of her life, the moments that stung her with intimations of consciousness and mortality, we must now do something similar with the book we have been reading. We must take its "multitudinous impressions [and] fleeting shapes" and make of them something whole, something "hard and lasting," a tool, a block of knowledge and understanding that can be compared to other such texts and judged as either good or bad.

This is a task Woolf considers of the utmost importance, one that should not be left to experts but assumed by the Common Reader. This reader must use her own tastes and sensitivities as her chief sources of discrimination and articulation. Woolf is asking us to become writers in our own right and to trust our instincts in setting down our thoughts and opinions on books. But what she is also saying is that these thoughts and judgments of the Common Reader, as opposed to those of the expert or professional, are of the utmost importance to an author.

These opinions become part of the air an author "breathes," feeding her work and making the reader complicit in her writing.

In "Hours in a Library," an essay written ten years before "How Should One Read a Book?," Woolf distinguishes between "the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading... and there is no connection whatever between the two." The man who loves learning is the pale "bookish" fellow who can't even boil water for tea, who sits wrapped in his dressing gown, searching for truth. "The true reader," writes Woolf, is "essentially young." He is active, tireless, moving through the

world hungrily and impatiently, taking it all in. She warns, "if knowledge sticks to [the reader] well and good, but to go in pursuit of it, to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill... the passion for pure, disinterested reading." What Woolf is describing positively here is the greedy, unfettered reading of childhood and young adulthood, the relationship to books that brings on the "disembodied, trance-like intense rapture that used to seize [us] and comes back now and again." She is referring to those books of childhood devoured without program or academic oversight.

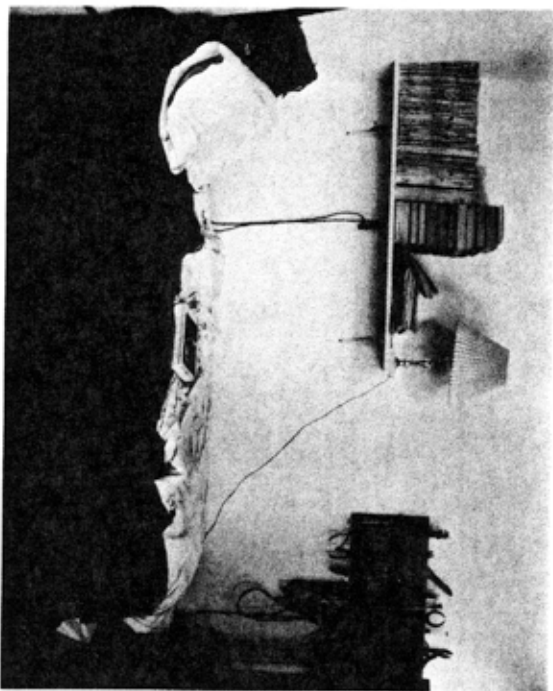
What are we to make of Woolf's wide-ranging statements in these two essays? On the one hand, she proffers advice on how to read and exhorts the reader to fill herself up with books so as to become a responsible citizen with strong opinions, one who can contribute to the cultural climate of her world. On the other hand, she claims that to read with a purpose in search of knowledge is a betrayal of the true nature of reading. Of the two types of reading, youthful and mature, Harold Bloom says: "The sorrow of professional reading is that you recapture only rarely the pleasure of reading you knew in youth, when books were a Hazittian gusto." (William Hazitt, the early nineteenth-century English essayist and literary critic, wrote an essay titled "On Reading Old Books." It is a love letter to the books of his youth.)

One of the ways I came to identify this mode of youthful reading was via a genre of book, often elegiac in tone, the bibliophilic memoir that begins by recounting the memory of a childhood spent dreamily lost in books. Several writers describe their early, precocious reading, often pinpointing the Aha! moment when it became clear to them that the abstract

signs on the page or blackboard signified a thing or a sound. Alberto Manguel, for instance, author of *A History of Reading*, describes a feeling of omniscience that came with the realization that he could read at around age four. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, author of the pithy, insightful memoir *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books* learned to read at three and a half. She was the prodigy reader, the baby plunked down in front of *The New York Times* and made to read the news for all who walked in the room. Both Manguel and Schwartz write of their early love of reading, of the long idylls of absorption in children's literature.

(I have always found these accounts of precocious reading a little grating. No doubt I am jealous, having come to reading late in life, and having had my first experiences of language fraught with the misapprehension and confusion of bilingualism. But that is another story. Suffice it to say that unlike Schwartz and Manguel, who were reading to themselves as children, I didn't take possession of books until considerably later.)

In *Ruined by Reading*, Schwartz conjures up a childhood of reading "behind closed doors... on my bed in the fading light," blissfully "bask[ing] in the everlasting present." For Woolf this youthful reading involves moments in which the ego is completely eliminated. Marcel Proust, in his little book *On Reading*, memorably figures this state of total absorption in the child alone in an empty house, mesmerized by a book, oblivious of meal-times and schedules, resentful of every intrusion. The reading of childhood is always posited as pure and disinterested, voracious and indiscriminating, an existential moment of bliss. I had this experience as a teenager, but lost it



and didn't encounter it again until I was thirty-eight and very pregnant. I felt that only this, the weight of my gestating body, gave me permission to sit in one place and read exactly as I pleased.

I am not alone in feeling this guilt occasioned by reading. Schwartz writes:

[Reading] was what I used to do through long evenings. Never mornings—even to one so self-indulgent, it seems slightly sinful to wake up and immediately sit down with a book.... In daylight I would pay what I owed the world. Reading was the reward.

(You may be wondering how this writer-reader, so conflicted about reading, was able to savor Virginia Woolf's essays at dawn. Those are the stolen hours before the routines of daily life set in—the clock hasn't started to tick on them yet. Anything is possible at that hour, the time of day which Sylvia Plath, getting up at 4 AM to write her final, *Ariel* poems before her children awoke, called the "blue hour.")

Schwartz goes on to say, apropos of choice and obligation:

Children generally read what they please, but addictive adults (writers especially) can get tangled in the toils of choice.... At times the ramifications of choice verge on the metaphysical, the moral, even the absurd. To read the dead or the living, the famous or the ignored, the kindred spirits or the brazenly unfamiliar? And how to go about it—systematically or at random?

At bottom, of course, the issue in choosing what to

ment les femmes, qu'a
cu près toutes celles de
rien eu à lui apprendre,
naturalisation, presque
offroyés le faubourg
rite de valoir d'échange,
en elle-même, mais lui
fruition dans tel petit
de David en la cité de

l'occasion, si s'en fait des
elle par une indécise
équilibrées qui le mûr
à l'incertitude dont il a
à l'occasion, si s'en fait des
à l'incertitude dont il a
à l'occasion, si s'en fait des
à l'incertitude dont il a

non sur l'heure avec un
marqué la fille à la cour
il roquerait un d'argent
après coup, il s'en amuse
par de faire d'effacement
intérait à cette créature
cu dans l'histoire et qui
si-tre une excuse dans
le intelligence des choses

ne faisaient que
Swann, qui était
tremblait d'être
omme de charmes
par parces,
réc la grandeur
age, s'abandonna
dehors de la poel

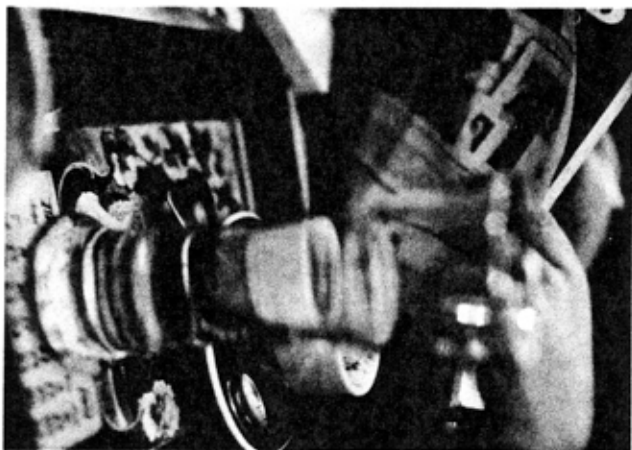
read (and what to do and how to live) is the old conflict, dating from the Garden, of pleasure versus duty: what we want to read versus what we think we ought to read....

Schwartz's incisive observations about pleasure and duty bring me to the crux of my deliberation, so perhaps this is the right moment to quote Kafka in full, as his statement on reading, written in 1904, sums up the most extreme, nihilistic position on duty:

I think we ought to read only the books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn't shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place?... What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.

Harold Bloom has referred to this kind of reading as "a difficult pleasure, [but one that is also] a plausible definition of the Sublime.... a reader's Sublime." Roland Barthes refers to it as the "Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts.... unsettles.... brings to a crisis [the reader's] relation to language."

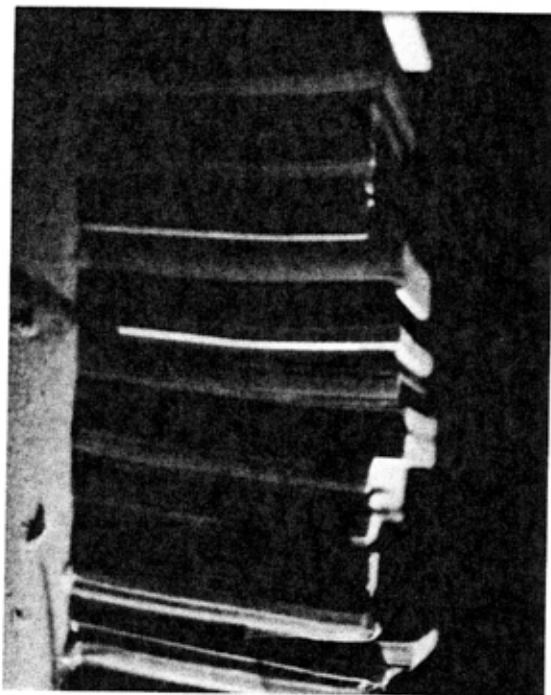
So far several models of reading have been posited. There is Bloom's model of the reader who chooses the classics because they are the books that mirror our souls and help us to confront mortality. There is Calvino's and Woolf's model of alternating



the classics with contemporary and minor works so as to better understand and appreciate the virtues of each. There is the youthful, voracious, and promiscuous reading of Proust, Schwartz, and Woolf, in which we feed and feast and are at one with the writer. And finally, there is Kafka's model that says we should not waste a second on anything but the most demanding and challenging books. (Interestingly, Kafka's movie-going habits, as revealed in a recently published book, were the opposite of his reading habits: trashy films were his favorites.)

I think it has been fairly obvious from the beginning of this essay (and I have the wisdom and acuity of perception of my friend Alison Strayer to thank for articulating it in her letter), that the most compelling vision of reading for me is the one done, as Virginia Woolf put it, with "pen & notebook," the one that implies a relation to writing, to work.

In the course of my research, I came upon a striking statement by Woolf about work in her diary (cited in Hermione Lee's biography of the writer). Woolf wrote in 1921, somewhat self-deprecatingly but also with the utmost seriousness: "One ought to work—never to take one's eyes from one's work; & then if death should interrupt, well it is merely that one must get up & leave one's stitching—one won't have wasted a thought on death." And this reminded me of something Dennis Potter, the British television writer and director who dreamt up *The Singing Detective* and other fabulous musical dramas, said in his extraordinary final days before succumbing to cancer of the pancreas. Potter chose to spend his last few months of life finishing two plays, and he did this with the help of doses of morphine delicately calibrated to manage his pain while allowing for maximum lucidity. Potter was euphoric about his work and



about this moment in his life. In an unforgettable BBC interview conducted shortly before he died, he told his host: "The fact is that if you see the present tense—boy do you see it! And, boy, can you celebrate it.... When I go flat out, I go flat out, and with a passion I've never felt. I feel I can write anything at the moment." Again, I realize I have strayed into talking about writing rather than reading, but if reading can be connected to work that is this passionate and life-sustaining, then this is the reading I want.

So how are we to draw up those reading lists finally? I have been fascinated to note how many writers invoke chance and randomness as guiding principles in choosing their books. I am talking about Lynne Sharon Schwartz, who, citing "the John Cage-ish principle that if randomness determines the universe it might as well determine my reading too," spent a winter reading the Greek tragedies because she happened to find a discounted set in a mail order catalogue. I'm talking about the serendipitous findings of Virginia Woolf, the little pamphlet from a hundred years ago that she comes across in a second-hand bookshop that stops her in her tracks and rivers her to the spot. I am talking about the happenstance of Georges Perec, who, while engaged in the tedious task of arranging his bookshelves, comes upon a book he'd lost sight of and writes:

"putting off until tomorrow what you won't do today, you finally re-devour [it] lying face down on your bed." He further speculates that in our pursuit of knowledge, "order and disorder are in fact the same word, denoting pure chance." And finally, I am talking about the passionate book collector unearthing his treasures after a two-year hiatus, as portrayed by Walter Benjamin in his autobiographical essay "Unpacking My



Library," for whom "chance and fate...are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books."

Just as a bookcase full of read and unread books conjures up a portrait of the owner over time ("joggers of the memory" Perce calls them), so the books that arrest us in the present constitute a reflection of "what we are, or what we are becoming or desire" (Schwartz). There is nothing random about that, or about any of these other seemingly random ways of coming to books, and it is from this notion that the oddly apt idea of books choosing us, rather than the other way around, seems to make sense. The idea of a book choosing the reader has to do with a permission granted. A book gives permission when it uncovers a want or a need, and in doing so asserts itself above all the hundreds of others jockeying to be read. In this way a book can become a sort of uncanny mirror held up to the reader, one that concretizes a desire in the process of becoming.

Virginia Woolf writes: "[Feed] greedily and lavishly upon books of all sorts...follow your own instincts...use your own reason...come to your own conclusions." I think the truest method, as Woolf suggests, is to be open and sensitized, creative, always on the lookout for the thing that will nourish a known or intuited desire or inking. At Vermont College, where I teach in the MFA in Visual Art Program, there is a big emphasis on reading and research. Vera Jacyk, a recent graduate once told me: "One of the problems with the Vermont program, and talking to so many people about so many books, is that everything begins to sound interesting. How do you decide what is for you?" My advice is to store up all the recommendations but be discriminating. Be attuned to your own hunches, appetites, and longings, your own creative urges. And from there, be like a

diviner, with passing mentions, quotes, footnotes, and possibly even just an evocative dust jacket, as your guideposts.

And so, getting back to my original *mise-en-scène*: where is that half-clad, distracted reader now? In the course of writing this essay, she read a great deal, and yes, she was in a state of "temporary grace" while doing it. But on the day she completed a first draft, the state of grace came to an abrupt halt, and she was taken aback by the speed with which that postpartum feeling, an acquaintance now for over thirty years, came back to take its place, and along with it, the familiar misgivings about what to read. She has not solved "the problems of restlessness, unfocus and hunger." However, she has made a few discoveries about herself and reading, ones that will at least mitigate the inevitable malaise when it returns.

She may never read Cervantes or the Bible, but she also recognizes with certainty that Virginia Woolf, whose writing feels more prescient than ever, is *her* classic. She has Italo Calvino, a new discovery, to thank for that understanding. In the course of her recent reading, she read Woolf's essay on Michel de Montaigne, and that led her to finally pick up a fat book that had been in her peripheral vision for many years: *The Complete Works of Montaigne*. In his essays, composed over four hundred years ago, he writes of idleness, calling it on the one hand the scourge of the mind, to be remedied only by writing, and on the other, man's ultimate goal: "[To live] is the most illustrious of your occupations....To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books." On reading this, she sighed deeply and thought to herself: I have only just scratched the surface of the problems of reading, writing, pleasure, and duty. Clearly, it is a project to be continued.

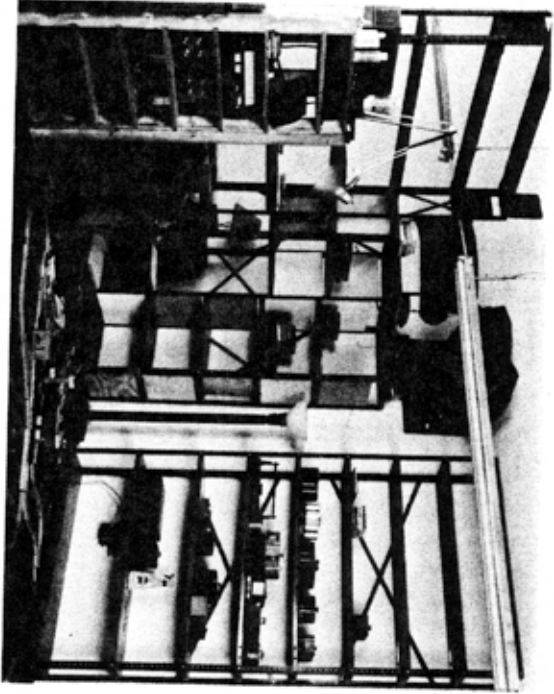


On a more prosaic note, she opens and reads most of what fate tosses in her path. For instance, not so long ago, her friend Ellen McMahon mentioned that she'd been reading an essay by Foucault in which he describes reading and writing as among his "technologies of the self," one of his core themes. That night, she took a biography of Foucault off the shelf and opened it to the page where she'd left off reading three years before. There is something superstitiously primitive about this need to have someone else grant "permission" in order to pick up a book (again). But it is also a deeply pleasurable way to read because it is rooted in dialogue and in friendship, in the social. And it is not the only way to come to books, but one of many threads and lines that get cast out and pulled in to form the great connective tissue that makes up our reading.

Recently, on a frigid winter day, she found herself in her studio surrounded by layers of books and papers. From this mass of paper strewn all over the sunlit floor, she began to conjure up an image of it all coming together, the parts knitting themselves into a web or net capable of holding her in a sort of blissful suspension. This fantasy obviously points to metaphors of maternal holding and other more phenomenological aspects of reading than have been covered in this essay. That is another reading and writing trajectory, an offshoot sown from the seeds of this current project, a possible thread to be pursued. But before taking up that thread and beginning new lists and stacking up new piles, she has promised herself a day to put in order those desperately chaotic and dust-covered bookshelves. Wish her luck. Better yet, and with a nod to Georges Perec, wish that she may abandon the project midway and succumb to something forgotten, something irresistible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"The Problem of Reading" was originally prepared as a lecture for the MFA in Visual Art Program at Vermont College in February 2003. I gratefully acknowledge everyone who supported me in this endeavor, but especially wish to thank the Vermont College community for its warm, generous response. In particular, I thank Miwon Kwon for inviting me to publish the essay as a book, and subsequently, for her clear, insightful editing. Thank you, Miwon! I extend my gratitude as well to Martin Beck for his exquisite design, and to Julie Ault for her support and advisement; to Lynne Sharon Schwartz, JoAnn Verburg, and James Welling for allowing me to reproduce their words and images; to Alison Strayer, my reading muse of twenty-nine years, for inspiring me to write about reading; and to Jason Simon for love and unending faith and optimism. I thank my friend Geneviève Letarte, for her encouragement, and lastly, my mother, Patricia Davey, for her love and support.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).
- _____. *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
- Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" and "Unpacking My Library" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
- Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).
- _____. *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000).
- Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel" in *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1998).
- Italo Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981).
- _____. *Why Read the Classics?* (New York: Vintage, 1999).
- William Hazlitt, "On Reading Old Books" in *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt 1778-1830* (New York: Random House, 1948).
- Mary Jacobus, *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000).
- Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).
- Hermione Lee, "Reading" in *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Random House, 1996).
- Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (New York: Random House, 2001).
- Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Penguin, 1996).
- Michel de Montaigne, "Of Idleness (1572-74)" and "Of Books (1578-80)" in *The Complete Works of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967).
- Georges Perec, "Brief Notes on the Art and Manner Of Arranging One's Books" in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (New York: Penguin, 1997).
- Marcel Proust, *Sur la Lecture* (Paris: Mille et une Nuits, 1994).
- Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay, *A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections About the Book and Writing* (New York: Granary Books, 2000).
- Jean Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).
- Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *Ruined By Reading: A Life in Books* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
- Alison Strayer, letter to the author (February 14, 2002).
- James Wolcott, "Postscript: Dennis Potter," *The New Yorker* (June 20, 1994).
- Virginia Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?" in *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925).
- _____. "Street Haunting" in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942).
- _____. *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt, 1976).
- _____. "Hours in a Library" and "Reading" in Andrew McNeillie, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume II 1912-1918* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).

To Barney

Editor: Miwon Kwon
Design: Martin Beck
Production Assistance: Dorri Margreiter
Printing: Typo Druck Sares, Vienna
ISBN: 0-9742605-0-9

This publication is supported in part by the MFA in Visual Art
Program at Vermont College.

