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Reading With Imagination

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Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

"Reading," Jean-Paul Sartre writes in his essay "What Is Literature?," "is a pact of generosity between author and reader. Each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself." Literature, he maintains, is a shared experience, and a literary work's reception and success is integral to it. "What the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values."

Every author, he believes, constructs his work from notions about the implied or potential reader; in other words, in choosing his reader, the author chooses his subject. Thus, since in Sartre's view a literary work is a such close collaboration between writer and reader, it must necessarily follow that a "good" reader produces "good" literature while a "bad" one, "bad" books. "The bad novel," Sartre writes, "aims to please by flattering, whereas the good one is an exigence and an act of faith."

Reading, Sartre goes on to say, is predicated on personal concerns and experiences and there is no such thing as a totally objective reader, a *tabula rasa* without tastes, opinions, loves. It is certain that the "The Aeneid" got a different reading (hearing?) in Virgil's time than it does today. Equally, a Nabokov scholar and a family therapist would read "Lolita" quite differently, neither of them being

right or wrong. It is not, then, the different textual interpretations that are at stake — the more the merrier, in fact — but instead it is the approach to the act of reading that matters. This approach does not rely on the tastes or the qualifications of particular readers — the feminists, the Tea Party members, the liberals — but rather on *how* exactly people read.

So how should one read?

In the Middle Ages, reading was regarded as a contemplative act. It was *lectio divina* and limited to sacred texts that, for the most part, were read out loud and optimally, the words read were repeated by the listeners in order to fill body and soul with their significance. Reading then was essentially a form of prayer. Today, however, most people read to be informed and instructed — where to take a vacation, how to cook, how to invest their money. Less frequently, the reasons may be escapist or to be entertained, to forget the boredom or anxiety of their daily lives. These are valid reasons, but I believe most of the reading one does for these reasons is actually a "bad" practice for reading literature.

What's more, our ability to read for pleasure is taxed by the amount of reading we do. There is such a glut of blogs, emails, texts and tweets that the distinction between literary works and nonliterary works has become badly blurred and people tend to read everything in the same way, pragmatically.

Literature has no single or simple definition and is not merely "imaginative" writing. Biographies, histories, diaries, essays are rightly read as literature as they combine the statement of facts with ideas and personal values and often do so in unusual or pleasing language. One does not read Samuel Pepys's "Diary" for a factual account of the London fire but for his style and point of view, just as one does not read Gore Vidal's "Lincoln" for the facts of the 16th presidency since more than 15,000 books have been published on the subject, but for Vidal's wit, intellect and insights on personal ambition.

Fiction, which I believe suffers most from modern readership, is by definition not factual. It may be about the real world and it may try to illuminate some facts

about the real world or how real people behave in it or, as is so often the case in modern literature, it may also be about the impossibility of portraying any such reality since the very nature of art is artifice. Primarily, however, fiction (and biography, essay, history, memoir only perhaps to a lesser degree) is a creative act, an act of the author's imagination and likewise, ideally, it should be read with imagination.

In my own writing, I have been accused of (or is it praised for?) being a minimalist, which I suppose means that I don't write a whole lot. This is true. For the most part, I avoid adjectives and I definitely avoid adverbs, which also means that I tend not to describe much. I rarely describe what my characters look like or what they wear or how they do their hair. My hope is that this will either not be important or if it is important it will somehow surface within the text. But better yet, by avoiding descriptions and explanations, I allow the reader the freedom to picture for themselves what my characters, their clothes and haircuts look like and thus participate in the text. In other words, I hope my readers will read my work with imagination.

In his book "The Act of Reading," Wolfgang Iser, known for his reader-response theories, writes that ideally a book should transform a reader by "disconfirming" his habitual notions and perceptions and thus forcing him or her to a new understanding of them. Take for example the beginning of "A Hundred Years of Solitude" by Gabriel García Márquez: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." Here the reader is shown ice as if for the first time, as a sort of miracle, firing his imagination and making him see something commonplace as something new.

Or look at the opening of "The Blue Flower," the stunning and wholly imagined life of the young German Romantic poet Novalis by Penelope Fitzgerald: "Jacob Dietmahler was not such a fool that he could not see that they had arrived at his friend's home on the washday." Another writer, a more ordinary writer, as Julian Barnes points out, would simply have written, "Jacob Dietmahler could see that they had arrived…" With no preamble, Fitzgerald then goes on to provide the

reader with the most intimate details of a family, their dirty laundry. Why not begin by describing the members of the family — how old they are, what they look like, what their names are — in a straightforward fashion? Instead, as in all her work, Fitzgerald eschews the predictable in favor of the accidental whose significance may not be readily apparent or, truth be told, may not have any real significance. Most important, crucial to it really, the washday passage both captures the movement of life and provides an indelible picture of 19th-century domestic life — how people looked and smelled.

Imagination is defined as "the creative process of the mind," and its power is both limitless and marvelous and most probably redemptive as well. We are surrounded by works of the imagination: our transportation, our communication, our technology. Every song we hear, every picture we look at that genuinely gladdens our heart for a moment is a work of the imagination. Literature is the language of the imagination refined by heightened sensibility, and reading, to use the literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman's phrase, should be "an encounter of imagination with imagination."

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