

Reading and the Difference it Makes

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I SUPPOSE THE EASIEST, AND MOST GLIB, and therefore most important answer to the questions “Why do I have to *read*?” or “Why do I have to read *that*?” or “Why do I have to read *like* that?” is, quite simply, you don’t: you don’t have to read anything, there is no instrumental value in reading in the ways in which we teach, or I teach, and indeed there may be no pleasure and no net result, no learning outcome, no increase in income.

And then for the question or larger questions of reading, with this—not so much uselessness or disinterestedness—with this admission in mind, I would take on three tangents or angles of attack (as we used to say when I was in ground school): the relationship between reading and class or labour; reading versus writing and the biblical idea of eating the book; and the Lacanian/Zizekian idea of interpassivity, or the “Subject supposed to read.”

And this *subject supposed to read* one might begin with, in terms of class, anecdotally, when I was visiting my sister a few years ago and, seeing me with the newspaper open, a friend of hers said, “Readin’ again, eh?”, which has become a sort of mantra around my household since. But really this class notion I’d like to reference with a book title of mine, my first collection of poetry from ECW Press in 1997, the book *Be Labour Reading*, a

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title I chose because it seemed to encapsulate neatly (perhaps too neatly) the paradox that *difficult* writing (and the notion of how easy it is, perhaps to write difficult texts), which is to say formally innovative or experimental writing, which is difficult to read, to make sense of or to navigate oneself in, was a kind of writing that obtained its cultural capital at the expense of the reader's economic capital: the texts were "belaboured" because the reader would not be labour (and perhaps the other way around), a condition made all the more tragic or ironic or paradoxical as I proceeded to spend the next eleven years being paid to read in the precarious job market of sessional academic labour.

And this necessitates saying why I am against learning outcomes (because of their instrumentality) and why I am against being against learning outcomes (because of the elitism of university pedagogy). Here John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* is useful for how it argues that we must consider postsecondary questions of the canon and the syllabus in connection with the secondary school system, a connection with all the more resonance to me because part of what I do at SFU is teach graduate courses to high-school teachers returning for an MA in English, but also because of the hierarchies of reading involved in the sessional and composition and college system—which is to say reading as marking.

Then, this connects with a different kind of work as reading, the notion of class, which troubles me because of how it seems as if I am saying that a text that is difficult to read will be more off-putting to a working-class reader than to a middle-class reader, which is clearly nonsense. That is, the kind of texts that I value, that I enjoy reading, those associated, if we are talking about late twentieth and early twenty-first century writing, with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing and the Kootenay School of Writing (how apropos that ACCUTE and the Vancouver Writers' Festival, or the academy and the market, both choose to ignore the local—of course, bpNichol and Nicole Brossard and Steve McCaffery are read—a bit—the canonized 70s) call into question just how reading functions in a globalized, mediatized culture of Empire:

Oppositionally, the car
became known as him. Without can happen
in: plural pushes skips
time zones, adds class to voice.
This waiting compresses that
time, appends archaeology
to the afternoon. Metal rattle.

So really Sunday is postponed, rendered
as retch. A W over the city, spinning
for commerce.

Jeff Derksen, "Solace"

But to quickly shift gears, if we would rather write than read, this is a long-standing desire, of course, and one that goes back to the book of Revelations, to the famous scene in Chapter 10 where St John is confronted with a mighty angel holding a "little book" in his hand—for some reason it seems important that the book be little—a mighty angel who spoke with "seven thunders" in his voice; St John says "I was about to write" (10:4) and immediately is told "write them not" (10:4) but instead to take the little book "and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey" (10:9) which indeed it is. And if we take this as an allegory for reading (as evidently David Koresh did), then in a way we can see that reading, or reading this, or reading like this, doesn't promise anything: it may start out sweet (the joy of having consumed a text) but ends up bitter (now I have to read more to understand this text).

Which presumably is why Lacan, in *Seminar VII*, refers twice to this trope of *eating the book*, remarking first that "the book itself acquires the value of an incorporation, the incorporation of the signifier itself, the support of the properly apocalyptic creation ... [a]nd this is why the question of the realization of desire is necessarily formulated from the point of view of a Last Judgment" (294)—indeed, if it isn't too frivolous, and given that Lacan was in the midst of proposing Antigone in her glorious suicidal act as an ethical hero, and thinking both of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians' massacre at Waco in 1993, and of a recent call for a suicide prevention workshop in my department at SFU (a 2004 NCHA study found that "12.7% of students have been diagnosed with depression and 11.6% have seriously considered suicide one to 10 times [and] 1.6% of SFU students ... reported having attempted suicide"), one might come to the conclusion that reading is not very good for you after all.

For while we like to think of reading as somehow an ethical act, superior to merely or passively watching television or playing a video game, perhaps, a la Zizek's notion of interpassivity (which draws on Lacan's comment that in Greek tragedy the chorus has an emotion reaction in our stead or that our most interior emotions are actually exterior to us, what Lacan called *ex-timité* or ex-timacy), reading is much more of a passive act. Here, and just to throw another striking trope into the fire, we can refer to *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James*

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Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African prince, written by himself (1774), in which, memorably, Gronniosaw remarks that on a Dutch slave ship his master “used to read prayers in public to the ship’s crew every sabbath day ; and when first I saw him read, I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master ; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips” (page 16).¹ As Henry Louis Gates remarks in “Writing, ‘Race,’ and the Critical Difference,” the “voice in the text was truly a millennial voice for the African person of letters in the eighteenth century, for it was the very voice of deliverance and of redemption which would signify a new order for the black” (64); which is to say, that, following Lacan’s argument that it is this very *misrecognition* (of the Analyst as the “Subject supposed to know”) that leads to transference, or the beginning of the analytic process, it was the African slave’s misrecognition of the book doing the talking, the book reading itself as it were, that led to the great expansion of liberatory narratives in nineteenth-century slave narratives.

¹ <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/browse-mixed-new?id=GroGron&tag=public&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed>