

THE OWL HAS FLOWN

Sven Birkets

Reading has a history. It was not always and everywhere the same. We may think of it as a straightforward process of lifting information from a page; but if we considered it further, we would agree that information must be sifted, sorted, and interpreted. Interpretive schemes belong to cultural configurations, which have varied enormously over time. As our ancestors lived in different mental worlds, they must have read differently, and the history of reading could be as complex as the history of thinking.

Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette*



READING and thinking are kindred operations, if only because both are actually and historically invisible. Of the two, reading has the stronger claim to invisibility, for thought at least finds a home from time to time in the written sign, whereas the *reception* of the written sign leaves no trace unless in written accounts after the fact. How do people experience the written word, and how have those experiencings, each necessarily unique, changed in larger collective ways down the centuries? The few indications we have only whet the speculative impulse.

We know from historians, for example, that before the seventh century there were few who read silently (writing some centuries before, Saint Augustine professed astonishment that Saint Ambrose read without moving his lips); that in Europe in the late Middle Ages and after, designated readers often entertained or edified groups at social or work-related gatherings. Then there is the fascinating study of Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller. Historian Carlo Ginzburg anatomizes his intellectual universe by triangulating between Menocchio's few books and the depositions taken at his trial for heresy. In *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg combines scholarly excavation with shrewd surmise to suggest how this lettered worker assembled a cosmology – one compounded in part from the rich reserves of the dominantly oral culture, and in part from his intense and methodical, if also fanciful, readings of the few texts he owned.

After Menocchio's day, with the proliferation of the mechanically produced books and the general democratization of education, reading not only spread rapidly, but changed its basic nature. As Robert Darnton writes

in his essay “The First Steps Toward a History of Reading,” summarizing the conclusions of his fellow historian Rolf Engelsing:

From the Middle Ages until sometime after 1750, according to Engelsing, men read “intensively.” They had only a few books – the Bible, an almanac, a devotional work or two – and they read them over and over again, usually aloud and in groups, so that a narrow range of traditional literature became deeply impressed on their consciousness. By 1800 men were reading “extensively.” They read all kinds of material, especially periodicals and newspapers, and read it only once, and then raced on to the next item.

That centrifugal tendency has of course escalated right into our present, prompted as much by the expansion of higher education and the demands of social and professional commerce as by the astronomical increase in the quantity of available print. Newspapers, magazines, brochures, advertisements, and labels surround us everywhere – surround us, indeed, to the point of having turned our waking environment into a palimpsest of texts to be read, glanced at, or ignored. It is startling to recall the anecdote about the philosopher Erasmus pausing on a muddy thoroughfare to study a rare scrap of printed paper flickering at his feet.

As we now find ourselves at a cultural watershed – as the fundamental process of transmitting information shifts from mechanical to circuit-driven, from page to screen – it may impinge upon our mental life. For how we receive information bears vitally on the ways we experience and interpret reality.

What is most conspicuous as we survey the general trajectory of reading across the centuries is what I think of as the gradual displacement of the vertical by the horizontal – the sacrifice of depth to lateral range, or, in Darnton’s terms, a shift from intensive to extensive reading. When books are rare, hard to obtain, and expensive, the reader must compensate through intensified focus, must like Menocchio read the same passages over and over, memorizing, inscribing the words deeply on the slate of the attention, subjecting them to an interpretive pressure not unlike what students of scripture practice upon their texts. This is ferocious reading – prison or “desert island” reading – and where it does not assume depth, it creates it.

In our culture, access is not a problem, but proliferation is. And the read-

ing act is necessarily different than it was in its earliest days. Awed and intimidated by the availability of texts, faced with the all but impossible task of discriminating among them, the reader tends to move across surfaces, skimming, hastening from one site to the next without allowing the word to resonate inwardly. The inscription is light but it covers vast territories: quantity is elevated over quality. The possibility of maximum focus is undercut by the awareness of the unread texts that await. The result is that we know countless more “bits” of information, both important and trivial, than our ancestors. We know them without a stable sense of context, for where the field is that vast all schemes must be seen as provisional. We depend far less on memory; that faculty has all but atrophied from lack of use.

Interestingly, the shift from vertical to horizontal parallels the overall societal shift from bounded lifetimes spent in single locales to lives in geographical dispersal amid streams of data. What one loses by forsaking the village and the magnification resulting from the repetition of the familiar, one may recoup by gaining a more inclusive perspective, a sense of the world picture.

This larger access was once regarded as worldliness – one travelled, knew the life of cities, the ways of diverse peoples...It has now become the birthright of anyone who owns a television set. The modern viewer is cosmopolitan at one remove, at least potentially. He has a window on the whole world, is positioned, no matter how poor or well-to-do, to receive virtually the same infinite stream of data as every other viewer. There is almost nothing in common between the villager conning his book of scriptures by lantern-light and the contemporary apartment dweller riffling the pages of a newspaper while attending to live television reports from Bosnia.

How is one to assess the relative benefits and liabilities of these intrinsically different situations? How do we square the pluses and minuses of horizontal and vertical awareness? The villager, who knows every scrap of lore about his environs, is blessedly unaware of cataclysms in distant lands. News of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 took months to travel across Europe. The media-besotted urbanite, by contrast, never loses his awareness of the tremors in different parts of the world.

We may ask, clumsily, which person is happier, or has a more vital grip on experience? The villager may have possessed his world more pungently,



Snow Plow. Wood engraving by Julius Griffith, 1975

more sensuously; he may have found more sense in things owing both to the limited scope of his concern and the depth of his information – not to mention his basic spiritual assumptions. But I also take seriously Marx’s quip about the “idiocy of rural life.” Circumscribed conditions and habit suggest greater immersion in circumstance, but also dullness and limitation. The lack of a larger perspective hobbles the mind, leads to suspiciousness and wary conservatism; the clichés about peasants are probably not without foundation. But by the same token, the constant availability of data and macroperspectives has its own diminishing returns. After a while the sense of scale is attenuated and a relativism resembling cognitive and moral paralysis may result. When everything is permitted, Nietzsche said, we have nihilism; likewise, when everything is happening everywhere, it gets harder to care about anything. How do we assign value? Where do we find the fixed context that allows us to create a narrative of sense about our lives? Ideally, I suppose, one would have the best of both worlds – the purposeful fixity of the local, fertilized by the availability of enhancing vistas. A natural ecology of information and context.

We are experiencing in our times a loss of depth – a loss, that is, of the very paradigm of depth. A sense of the deep and natural connectedness of things is a function of vertical consciousness. Its apotheosis is what was once called wisdom. Wisdom: the knowing not of facts but of truths about human nature and the processes of life. But swamped by data, and in thrall to the technologies that manipulate it, we no longer think in these larger and necessarily more imprecise terms. In our lateral age, living in the bureaucracies of information, we don’t venture a claim to that kind of understanding. Indeed, we tend to act embarrassed around those once-freighted terms – *truth, meaning, soul, destiny*... We suspect the people who use such terms of being soft and nostalgic. We prefer the deflating one-liner that reassures us that nothing need be taken seriously; we inhale atmospheres of irony.

Except, of course, when our systems break down and we hurry to the therapist’s office. Then, trying to construct significant narratives that include and explain us, we reach back into that older lexicon. “My life doesn’t seem to make sense – things don’t seem to mean very much.” But the therapist’s office is a contained place, a parenthetical enclosure away from the

general bustle. Very little of what transpires there is put into social circulation. Few people would risk exposing their vulnerable recognitions to the public glare.

The depth awareness, where it exists, is guarded as a secret. If we have truly wise people among us, they avoid the spotlights – it is part of their wisdom to do so. For the fact is that there is no public space available to individuals who profess vertical awareness. At best there are pop pulpits, public television slots that can accommodate a Joseph Campbell, Betty Friedan, or Rabbi Kushner.

Wisdom, an ideal that originated in the oral epochs – Solomon and Socrates represent wisdom incarnate, and Athena or Minerva were wisdom deified – is predicted on the assumption that one person can somehow grasp a total picture of life and its laws, comprehending the whole and the relation of parts. To *comprehend*: to “hold together.” We once presumed that those parts added up, that there was some purpose or explanation to our being here below. If that purpose could not be fully fathomed, if it rested with God or Providence, it could at least be addressed and questioned.

The explosion of data – along with general societal secularization and the collapse of what the theorists call the “master narratives” (Christian, Marxist, Freudian, humanist...) – has all but destroyed the premise of understandability. Inundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture. Instead of carrying on the ancient project of philosophy – attempting to discover the “truth” of things – we direct our energies to managing information. The computer, our high-speed, accessing, storing, and sorting tool, appears as a godsend. It increasingly determines what kind of information we are willing to traffic in; if something cannot be written in code and transmitted, it cannot be important.

The old growth forests of philosophy have been logged and the owl of Minerva has fled. Wisdom can only survive as a cultural ideal where there is a possibility of vertical consciousness. Wisdom has nothing to do with the gathering of organizing facts – this is basic. Wisdom is a seeing *through* facts, a penetration to the underlying laws and patterns. It relates the immediate to something larger – to a context, yes, but also to a big picture that

refers to human endeavor *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity. To see through data, one must have something to see through *to*. One must believe in the possibility of comprehensible whole. In philosophy this is called the “hermeneutic circle” – one needs the ends to know which means to use, and the means to know which ends are possible. And this assumption of ends is what we have lost. It is one thing to absorb a fact, to situate it alongside other facts in a configuration, and quite another to contemplate that fact at leisure, allowing it to declare its connection with other facts, its thematic destiny, its resonance.

Resonance – there is no wisdom without it. Resonance is a natural phenomenon, the shadow of import alongside the body of fact, and it cannot flourish except in deep time. Where time has been commodified, flattened, turned into yet another thing measured, there is no chance that any piece of information can unfold its potential significance. We are destroying this deep time. Not by design, perhaps, but inadvertently. Where the electronic impulse rules, and where the psyche is conditioned to work with data, the experience of deep time is impossible. No deep time, no resonance, no wisdom. The only remaining oases are churches (for those who still worship) and the offices of therapists. There, paying dearly for fifty minutes, the client gropes for a sense of coherence and mattering. The therapist listens, not so much explaining as simply fostering the possibility of resonance. She allows the long pauses and silences – a bold subversion of societal expectations – because only where silence is possible can the vertical engagement take place.

There is one other place of sanctuary. Not a physical place – not church or office – but a metaphysical one. Depth survives, condensed and enfolded, in authentic works of art. In anything that can grant us true aesthetic experience. For this experience is vertical, it transpires in deep time and, in a sense, secures that time for us. Immersed in a ballet performance, planted in front of a painting, we shatter the horizontal plane. Not without some expense of energy, however. The more we live according to the lateral orientation, the greater a blow is required, and the more disorienting the effect. A rather unfortunate vicious cycle can result, for the harder it is to do the work, the less inclined we are to do it. Paradoxically, the harder the work, the

more we need to do it. We cannot be put off by the prospect of fatigue or an incentive-withering sense of obligation.

What is true of art is true of serious reading as well. Fewer and fewer people, it seems, have the leisure or the inclination to undertake it. And true reading is hard. Unless we are practiced, we do not just crack the covers and slip into an alternate world. We do not get swept up as readily as we might be by the big-screen excitements of film. But if we do read perseveringly we make available to ourselves, in a most portable form, an ulterior existence. We hold in our hands a way to cut against the momentum of the times. We can resist the skimming tendency and delve; we can restore, if only for a time, the vanishing assumption of coherence. The beauty of the vertical engagement is that it does not have to argue for itself. It is self-contained, a fulfillment.

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The Dukhobor Market, Nelson. Linocut by Martha I. Houston, 1965