

## How to Read and Why

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To Bloom Shakespeare is if not God at least the firmament that vaults above all literature. The highest praise he can bestow is to compare something with Shakespeare, even if it inevitably will fall short. And just as in his book *Genius*<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare is invoked and intoned in almost every paragraph. The amazing thing is that this does not become tedious, on the contrary, it serves as theme and a glue holding everything together. Bloom was an avid reader since early childhood and his life became his books, and the writers, as well as their characters, became his lifelong friends, and it is this very fact that endears you to all the references to Shakespeare, along, be it to less a degree, other favorites of his. We are in the presence of his friends, and friends become more dear to you the more often they are invited into your thoughts. Bloom is not an academic critic, at least not in this book, although he is of course an academic himself. But you can be an academic for many reasons, and the pursuit of a career is only one, alas being more and more the prevalent one; you can also see it as a sanctuary, allowing yourself to do what you like most in ways which gives you most delight. He writes not in the spurious ambition of offering a scientific approach to literature, but simply to convey his own almost childlike exuberance and unflagging enthusiasm. His approach is hence very personal not afraid of making comparisons nor at times sounding a bit opinionated, after all that is the charm. Now as how to read and why to read, no explicit instructions are given, although at times he does remind himself of the ostensible purpose of the book and gives some advice, but the advice is secondary to the main thrust of his presentation, which is to invite the reader to share with him his reading experiences, and hence to be intrigued enough to go to the source, in case that would be unfamiliar to you. I for one could not resist the temptation to seek out the short story about the Hills white as Elephants by Hemingway. The book is organized by short stories, poems, novels which come in two parts, the concluding one concerned with American literature, and then plays of course.

About the short story he stresses that it, unlike the novel, is made up by excluding as much as possible, putting greater demands on the readers imagination than the novel, where the author traditionally does much more work for you. The idea of letting yourself be absorbed by a novel is a very romantic one, and which most people have experienced, at least in their younger years, and hence tend to nourish the hope of re-experience. Thus novels sell better than short stories, that make much more demands on the reader. The masters he choose correspond to a large degree with mine. The great Russians such as Chekhov and Turgenev, as well as Borges, and to a lesser degree Nabokov. Nabokov is very clever and resorts to tricks as to send secret messages to the reader by using initial letters of words in a paragraph. Towards this I am ambivalent. On one hand it may be great fun to make up, on the other hand it seems to be almost perpendicular to the medium of

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<sup>1</sup> reviewed in an early volume of mine stemming from 2004

literary writing, more of the nature of cross-word puzzles, then I rather do mathematics or program. I used at one time to be enchanted by Hemingway's ability to evoke by small means, and hence he comes better across in the short story than in the novel, although I have read and reread *The Sun also Rises* a number of times, the first time in a Swedish translation while still being essentially a child.

When it comes to poetry I tend to quickly get bored and often skip poetic reviews. This may be a bit surprising as I think of myself as having a 'poetic' temperament, whatever is really meant by that. I do not mean it as self-praise, rather on the contrary. It bespeaks to me a reluctance to get engaged in the world, of preferring to be lazy and self-indulgent, treasuring above else ephemeral moments of existential insights triggered by trivial phenomena in the real world with strong evocative potential. While given the temperament, but not the patience to express it. Thus I impatiently tend to quickly read through a poem, seeing but words and a likely pretentious intent. It is to the seductive charm of the author of this book of a pamphlet that I am tempted to do a second reading and then suddenly have it pop up in front of me, similar to being presented with confusing visual cues, which suddenly make sense. And for a brief moment one realizes what it is all about and one becomes almost tempted to try it out oneself. Life is short, too short to realize all ones potentials. Not that I am always indifferent to poetry. I was intrigued by it as a child, and when I was sixteen I wrote some poems in English, meant though as parodies, indicative of my own ambivalent attitude. Bloom advises one to learn poems by heart. Learning by heart is nowadays a disparaged activity implying mindlessness and lack of creativity and understanding. It used to be part of my early schooling to learn psalms by heart, and one accepted it as one accepted most things imposed. But of course learning by heart is not an end, but a beginning as well as a means. Only when you know it by heart can you start to possess it, and hence to understand it. I have, entirely voluntarily, learned a few poems by heart. The classical one by Blake<sup>2</sup>, as well as one extremely seductive one by the Swedish poet Stagnelius, to which I took immediately, being, as it happened, in a very appropriate mood. So indeed the author does give advice which is both explicit as well as useful. So who are the poets he chooses? Housman, Blake, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, Milton, Wordsworth (what an apposite name for a poet?). Coleridge as well as Shelley and Keats, all whom I know of course. In addition Brontë and Dickinson, whom he praises to the sky (i.e. to Shakespearean heights. In addition two anonymous ballads, as good as anything that goes as poetry, and above all material for poets to develop and embellish. After all poetry is a tradition based on influence and borrowings, as all traditions are. And one should never forget that poetry, unlike prose, is not about sense, but about the joyous, bordering to the obsessive, play with words, and thus close to, but of course distinct from, music. Now one of the secrets of a poem is its meter, and remnants of that is also to be found in so called free verse, which might suggest that the composing of a poem is a kind of cross-word puzzle. Nothing further from the truth, the rhythms and rhymes come unbidden, according to Goethe, otherwise the poet would go mad.

When it comes to drama, he discusses *Hamlet*, this confusing and unwieldy piece of play, at great length. Shakespeare is holy, or at least holy writ, and one may be forgiven

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<sup>2</sup> To see the world in a grain of sand/and heaven in a flower/to hold infinity in the palm of your hand/and eternity in an hour

for suspecting what in others would incur censure, in the case of the Bard only becomes occasion for further admiration, so much the more intriguing for being unexpected. Then, maybe unexpected, Ibsen and Wilde, represented by *Hedda Gabler* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He points out that the drunken poet in the former is based on Strindberg, a bitter Scandinavian rival to Ibsen (and to my mind unfairly overshadowed by the latter, for one thing he was much more than a playwright and he comes to the fore not so much in his experimental plays, which easily translates, as in his rich Swedish prose). As to Wilde, Bloom is delighted and cannot refrain from quoting at length from him, stressing a context it shares with Lewis Carroll's Alice. To watch a play performed is not the optional way he cautions, reading could often be more effective. Ideally, he suggests, you should first read a play, then watch it performed, and then read it again (many times over?).

When it comes to novels I am less impressed by the modern American ones, such by Cormack McCarthy, Morrison, Pynchon, maybe included as a kind of obligation imposed by editors. But among the classical ones I read with delight his comments no those he chose by Austin, Stendhal, Dickens, Proust, Dostoevsky, James and Mann, all of which I have read. I read Austin as a teenager, but I sadly remember very little from that, to some extent because I lacked the necessary life experience I suspect. I read *the Charterhouse of Parma* in the early 1978, but I recall almost nothing from it, many years earlier I read *Red and Black* and was then shocked by the cynicism of love as expressed by the thoughts and actions of the protagonist Sorel. Dickens was a favorite of mine in my teens, a large part of the delight to be found in the window back to the 19th century the books provided, hence the classical illustrations was a very important part of it, just as illustrations were when I was reading as a child. It is sobering to think that when I discovered Dickens, he had been dead for less than a century, and there were still people alive, who may in their infancy have seen him alive. Proust provided one of my most satisfying reading experiences of my life, extended for almost six months. Dostoevsky became a favorite when I had outgrown Dickens, and the comparison between the two, which was sometimes effected, scandalized me. Dickens was pure burlesque, with a large dose of sentimental nostalgia thrown in; while Dostoevsky was the real thing addressing deep existential questions. James I also read as a teenager, but found him rather bloodless, it would take me into late adulthood to become sensitive to his particular tone. And Mann I read in German, party out of bravado. One thing becomes obvious in retrospect, you almost never remember the plot of a novel, which shows what happens is of much less impact, after all it is fictional, then how it happens. You remember the mood of a novel, because this is what you look for in an alternate reality, and as such it transcends mere fiction, because the latter is is not a category that has any relevance. Whether the mood is made up or not is moot, as the mood once evoked creates its own reality and claims for existence, very much in the spirit of the ontological proof of Gods existence by Anselm. Bloom does not speak very much of moods, at least not explicitly, but he speaks about characters which is intimately related. In what way does a real character differ from a made up one? After all you may understand and know a fictional character more intimately than a real one. One obvious difference is that you can interact with a real one, but not, at least not directly, with a fictional. But in that sense there are a lot of real characters who are for all intents and purposes fictional, I am of course thinking of celebrities and those who are already dead

for a long time. Princess Diana was a fictional character to most of the people who knew her, and the grief those felt for her was the same kind of grief the reading public felt for Dickens little Nell more than a century earlier. A grief of pure sweetness and none of the hard pain of real loss, because after all even after death fictional characters are as much alive as before.

I have read all my life, yet at the end of it (turning as old as the author was back in 2000) it feels as if it just have started. So many book unread, so much I would have like to have incorporated into my extended consciousness already in my youth. In fact there are so many things you would have liked to have done in your youth, but you must realize that there never was time, even for a fraction of what ideally would have been included. We all could have lived so many different lives, but we have to accept that we did not, and could not. And maybe it would have been hell had we been able to. If your experience can swallow all of the universe, you find yourself in a solipsistic prison.

I learned to read by myself when I was six, which started the first of my many periods of intense reading. Reading, which peaked the summer I turned ten. Then I only read childrens' books, being much aware that adult books were different and not for me to touch, as I suspected and feared that they would be boring and depressing, yet very much intriguing, because as I grew older I tired of reading simplified prose and plots and started to yearn for something more solid and dense (and even fantasized about books of extreme realism which would entail every detail of life). But I read Jules Verne and Sherlock Holmes as well as books by Dumas, not really realizing that those were not books primarily meant for children. My two favorite books were 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Treasure Island' which I read and reread (and whose plots are indelibly engraved in memory). Puberty caused a temporary hiatus, but then it picked up again, slowly at first and then I discovered English and started systematically to read books in English, even keeping a tally, which much to my regret I have lost. To read in English meant rediscovering the joys of reading again, just as I ten to fifteen years later started to revive the initial delights of reading systematically by reading in German, and amazingly, the same revival seems to occur again when closing to seventy I start to read in French. But life is short, and alas, the pleasures of Russian reading will most likely never come my way, although I have dreamed about it for over forty years.

As I had finished high-school there was another hiatus, made palpable to me because I recall the intense pleasure with which I read *Wuthering Heights*. But then from my early twenties, when I read the Russians in Swedish or English translation, along with classical Victorian novels, my reading resumed if at a measured pace, I was after all distracted by my mathematical career. Then in my early thirties, I added German and a lot of Mann, Hesse and Zweig came my way. Reading continued throughout the years, at a steady but not intensive pace, and then in the fall of 2003 I started once again, as I had done in my teens, to keep a tally of books read, with the difference of also writing an essay on everyone. For the last fifteen years I have processed 900 books, impressive maybe, but far from exceptional. Yet unless my pace increases significantly I will never have time to read all the books in my library.