

TAKADA

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The Art of Reading

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An Image Without Explanation for the Time Being:

The significance of the image above shall be revealed in due course. Just make a mental note of it for now.

"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."

- Simone Weil

Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli.

The fate of books depends on the discernment of the reader.

- Terentius Maurus, *De Literis, Syllabis et Metris* (1286)

Preface

If you want to read well, you must pay attention. There is a lot more to reading well, but paying attention is an unavoidable first step. If you are not paying attention, you might as well stop reading, for you are no longer registering what is being said, which means that you have already

stopped reading anyway. Just looking at the words won't do. And I say this on the authority of over a quarter of a century of teaching experience. The primary emphasis during my teaching was on literature (on poems and stories and plays and novels and even on movies), but I have also had ample opportunity to explore the art of reading in general, using critical works as well as works in other fields, like theology and philosophy, or psychology and sociology. Regardless of the kind of text read, after a good reading the reader should be in possession of the meaning of the text in all its nuances. This essay will explore all that it takes to achieve that goal.

Part I: There is More to Reading Than Meets the Eye

Reading is the other side of writing. It is to writing what hearing is to speaking. Sometimes we don't really hear what people are telling us. Or vice versa. This applies to reading as well. There may be times when what we think we are reading is not what was written at all. In due course I shall explore the reasons for this. Right now let me simply make a few thought-provoking observations:

Good readers are what they read. Bad readers read what they are. Good reading is an act of love, bad reading is an act of self-love. The act of reading is an act of construal (and, by the same token, bad reading is an act of misconstrual). In other words, the good reader must construe the text (even as the bad reader will misconstrue it). Reading, then, is a highly active enterprise (as is misreading, of course). The good reader pays attention to every element in a text and does not jump to conclusions prematurely. The bad reader may not practice such virtues. Or he/she may distort or misapply them. The good reader lets the text suggest the context within which it is to be understood. The bad reader either ignores the context (even if perhaps inadvertently) or changes it (even if perhaps unwittingly). The good reader implicitly recognizes the fact that an interpretation is not something superimposed on a given text, but something suggested by it. The bad reader does nothing of the sort.

Even if there were nothing more to good reading, things would already be fairly complicated. Unfortunately, we haven't even begun to scratch the surface yet. Implicit in my statement, for example, that "good readers are what they read" is the idea that good readers are capable of putting aside their own egos for the duration of the act of reading. In other words, they turn

themselves into empty receptacles, if you will (and if you are inclined to take offense at that metaphor, you may already be committing the error of jumping to conclusions. Please don't do that. Just bear with me for the time being. Give me the benefit of a doubt). In any case, it is not easy to disengage our selves (even if just temporarily) in order to give our undivided attention to another - first to the text and, ultimately (by means of the text), to the writer of the text (more of this in a moment). Unless we are willing to do this, we shall never become good readers (more of this in a moment, too). So the first rule (as paradoxical as it may sound) is: **In order to read well, you must learn to ignore yourself.** You must remember that the text is not about you. That you are reading it in order to get something from it, ultimately from its writer. Who, if he/she is doing his/her job right, is working for you, for your benefit.

The next step is to become more conscious of the whole reading-writing dichotomy. Every text is produced by an **actual writer** (a real person), who in the act of writing automatically places in the text a version of him/herself, the **implied writer** (a *persona* or role played by the real person writing). What may not be so obvious at first is that the implied writer automatically creates a mirror image of another *persona*, the **implied reader**, which the **actual reader** reading the text in question is implicitly asked to play (along with). This complex interaction between real persons playing roles both in the act of writing and in the act of reading should get a special lift in our understanding as we reflect on the fact that the Latin origin of the modern English word "person" is *persona*, meaning "mask," originally a hand-held mask that actors on the classical stage used to cover their faces with while playing their roles. Both writing and reading are, in fact, acts - that is, roles that writers and readers voluntarily take on.

It is easy to see this scheme at work in a novel like *Huckleberry Finn*. The actual writer was Mark Twain (already a *persona* in that his real name was Samuel Clemens), the implied writer is the narrator (and hero of his "own" story), Huck Finn. Since Huck Finn is a fictitious character, it is easy to see that he is a role played by Mark Twain (already also a role played by Samuel Clemens). The difference between an actual writer and an implied writer is that the latter is text-bound whereas the former is not. The actual writer is outside the text (and doesn't eventually survive it), the implied writer is inside the text (and will live forever there, as long as copies of the text exist and will come to "life" again in the reader's imagination each time the text is read).

The concept of the implied reader may be a bit more difficult to grasp. In the case of *Huckleberry Finn*, the narrator begins by addressing the reader directly. The very first word of the novel is, in fact, "you." "You don't know about me," says Huck Finn, "without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly." In this ingenious opening of a great American classic (though not without controversy in its time as well as in our own), we see the whole gamut at work. Mark Twain playing the role of Huck Finn who immediately brings us "into" the text by addressing us directly. Reading those opening words should make us immediately cognizant of who we are *supposed* to be as we begin to read the book. We are supposed to be Huck Finn's "contemporaries" who may have already read about him in a previous book (though whether we have or not is neither here nor there). The point is that we begin by assuming the role of the implied reader. By doing this we are actually cooperating (playing along) both with Huck Finn and through him with Mark Twain himself.

I said earlier that "good readers are what they read." Readers who go along with Huck Finn (and Mark Twain) by pretending to be what Huck Finn asks them to pretend to be, are willingly taking on the role that the text implicitly demands of them. This willing cooperation is in perfect harmony with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous remark about the "willing suspension of disbelief . . . which constitutes poetic faith." And it is also in perfect harmony with Ralph Waldo Emerson's dictum about the "fundamental law of criticism," namely, that "every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit which gave it forth." Elsewhere in his work Emerson puts this slightly differently: "It is remarkable, the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They impress us with the conviction, that one nature wrote and the same reads." Nothing short of this kind of cooperation will yield good reading. But there is still more to good reading than meets the eye.

Part II: You Never Get What it Means!

The problem is that there is always more or less of a discrepancy between what a text says and what it means. This is actually a universal characteristic of all languages. For the moment suffice it to say that because of this discrepancy **we never get what a text means, only what it says.** Which means that we have to figure out what a text means on the basis of what it says. In other

words, we are always in the position of having to construe meaning on the basis of the various clues we get in any given text. The easiest way of seeing the issue writ large here is to consider the following simple examples: "They kicked him upstairs" and "They put him out to pasture." Very different things are being said in these common expressions, but something similar is meant in each case. Each of these sayings "means," in fact, something like "they forced him into early retirement."

Not long ago a friend of mine sent me a list of oxymorons by e-mail. Since an oxymoron is supposed to be a contradiction in terms, what struck me about the list is that many of the pairs listed there were not really contradictory except in a literal sense. Take, for example, "act naturally" and "found missing." Only the blithely literal-minded among us would find these contradictory. To act naturally is obviously to act in such a way as to seem not to be acting at all. And it is perfectly intelligible to say that while looking for something, we came to the conclusion (we found out, if you will) that the something in question was missing.

"Resident alien" and "airline food" are, on the other hand, very different cases. "Resident alien" is actually an official designation of a person living in the United States with a so-called green card (I was once such a person myself). "Airline food" is, of course, intended to be funny. The idea is that the food served on airlines is so bad that it doesn't deserve the name "food." There are many other interesting examples in the list, but I will just comment on two more: "soft rock" and "taped live." Again, the contradiction is not only apparent and apparent only on a literal level, but these two pairs once again demand to be read (interpreted) in very different ways. Obviously the "rock" in "soft rock" is rock 'n' roll and not stone, so that soft rock means rock, say, in contradistinction to "acid rock," for example (and keep in mind that the latter is not made of acid either). "Taped live," on the other hand, means that although the show we may be watching was taped at an earlier time, it was then a live performance as opposed to a performance taped bit by bit and later edited into an apparently seamless web, as is the case with a movie.

The point is that these so-called oxymorons make perfect sense provided that we don't read them with simple-minded literalness. If we read everything with simple-minded literalness, the world around us would appear to be a totally insane place, judging by the words we use to describe it. As it is, things may not be as bad as they seem, even if in the English-speaking world we

sometimes park our cars on the driveway and drive them on the parkway. When it comes to reading (and not just reading, mind you) having an open mind (albeit extremely important) is not enough. We need a highly flexible mind as well. Earlier in this essay I stated that the discrepancy between what we say and what we mean is more or less universal in all languages. I will now turn to the reason for this in the next paragraph. What follows here is lifted, in part, from my last book (to date, as of this writing), *Pious Impostures and Unproven Words*:

Most people assume that the words we use are properly literal to begin with and that any metaphorical use of them is, in fact, improper, abnormal, or deviant. In other words, most people think that words start out with literal meanings and that subsequent metaphoric uses of them are imposed on them after the fact. In a way we think of metaphoric language as language lost which, like paradise lost, is due to a fall, a fall away from literal usage. If we could just prune our languages of all metaphoric usages - so most people might think - we could actually go back to a kind of prelapsarian linguistic clarity where, like in paradise before the fall, we wouldn't have to interpret anything, for anything and everything would be automatically as clear as a bell (another metaphor).

As things stand now, though, it seems clear (clear?) that we are forced, by dint of some inexplicable and elusive necessity, to tolerate - nay, to live with - innumerable metaphors in our languages. It seems that somewhere in its prehistory, the human mind has taken a perverse turn toward the ineluctable impropriety of metaphor, probably due to some temptation to say something witty (oxymoronic?). We have been stuck with figures of speech ever since. Now figures of speech can be useful or effective under certain circumstances (poets, for example, seem enamored of them), but we should constantly be on our guard against them (so most people might think and, in a way, rightly so), lest they ambiguate our messages contrary to our intentions.

A careful examination of actual language use should quickly tell us, though, that this way of thinking is, for the most part, an illusion. It is true that live metaphors are easy to detect and appear to be perhaps playful deviations from the norm, but it is also true that so-called literal usage is nothing other than an inexhaustible store of dead metaphors. (Can't you just "hear" the utterly hopeless metaphoriticity in practically everything that I am saying here?) It appears that

words are not born literally, that their births occur in the trauma of a figurative transfer. The word "metaphor," for example, "literally" means "over-carry" or "transfer." Its use involves the "turn" according to which its literal or "true" meaning is not its literal or "true" meaning. The fact (etymologically something "done") is that without metaphors there could be only proper names in our languages (just one unique word for each person or thing or concept in the world). Communication in a linguistically limited world like that (that is, limited to literal meanings) would be rendered downright impossible.

Comparing "fact" (again, something "done") with "fiction" (etymologically something "made"), we can instantly see that they are more related than not. One good way of getting at the dead metaphoricity of most of our grandiose concepts is, in fact, to look for their etymological origins. "Nature," for example, comes to us from a Latin word meaning "birth," while "culture" comes from a Latin word for a farming tool. This makes sense (all metaphors make sense, of course, but never literally), for when we till the soil, we soil (pun intended) nature, thereby turning it into culture (which has come to mean so many things by now that for its original meaning we have to add the Latin word for "earth" to it: thus, agriculture). Other grandiose concepts, such as "truth" or "religion" yield equally humble origins rich with implications. "Truth" is related to "tree" - the original idea must have had something to do with wood's relative endurance, so that "truth" is that which lasts a long time (unlike perhaps "falsehood" which may be quickly uncovered - in fact the ancient Greek word for "truth" means something like an unveiling). "Religion" means something like to be tied down. No, not in the sense of "kinky sex," but in the sense of not being free to do as we please. The religious may be said to be voluntarily tied down to what they take to be (or were taught to believe to be) the everlasting "laws" of God.

Once more, then, what emerges here is the idea that to read well we not only need an open mind but a flexible mind as well. We can't take words at face value. We must see them in the context in which they make sense. This context is forever changing. And it is generated by the words of a given text, where the text itself is generated by an actual writer who, if he or she is competent, will generate contexts within which the words of a given text will harmonize with one another in such a way as to help the reader to construe them properly (as opposed to improperly).

A Pause: Some Rules for Reading Well

Before considering two more issues that pertain to the art of reading well, let me pause here for some "rules" I have been sharing with my classes during the last decade of my teaching career. Applying these "rules" with an open and flexible mind will guarantee (yes, I know that's a strong word) good reading. Here they are:

See all that's in a text (but no more than what's in a text): If you make a mistake at this level, you are likely to distort the entire context of a given text. In other words, if you see something in a text that's not there (though, of course, you think that it *is* there), you are adding something to what you are reading, so that you are no longer reading the text you think you are reading. One technical term for a mistake at this level is "irrelevant association." This happens when something in a text triggers something that you associate with something unpleasant (or something pleasant, for that matter) in your own personal experience. When this happens the temptation is great to assume that the writer is "talking" about this unpleasant (or pleasant, as the case may be) experience of yours, when (in fact) he/she might be talking about something entirely different. A mistake like this (an "irrelevant association") may lead to a complete misconstrual of a given text.

A corollary of this idea is the notion that **what's in a text is plenty for you to work with.** In other words, there is no point in seeing things that are not there. One way of avoiding any sort of erroneous association made with something said in a text is not only to pay attention to what is really being talked about in the text (as opposed to what is merely being said in it), but also not to jump to conclusions prematurely. Don't assume that you understand what a writer means until you have completed reading the entire text and everything checks out and/or falls into place. It is, of course, impossible not to make tentative guesses or hypotheses as to the meaning of the whole fairly early on in the reading process, but remember to remain both open and flexible-minded nevertheless. Be ready, in other words, to adjust your sense of what a text is all about as you go along.

The evidence for a given interpretation is in the text itself, but it is precisely the text itself that needs interpretation in the first place. This appears to be a hopeless dilemma (remember, though, that appearances can be misleading). It is easy to see that this dilemma is related to the idea that what a text says is not identical with what it means. Which is why it is difficult to

convince a literal-minded person that the expression "They kicked him upstairs" doesn't mean that anybody was actually kicked at all. Again, the thing to do to avoid misconstruing a text is not to jump to conclusions prematurely, to let the text build the context in the reader's mind within which it is to be interpreted - that is, understood. This involves nothing less than a version of the so-called hermeneutical circle.

According to the hermeneutical circle in order to understand the whole, you must first understand the parts, but in order to understand the parts, you must first understand the whole. On the face of it (remember, though, you can't accept words according to their face value), the hermeneutical circle implies that understanding is impossible. In the classroom I used to ask what at first I had assumed was a mere rhetorical question: "How can we get out of the hermeneutical circle?" To my surprise some student would almost instantly have the answer, and the right answer at that. The way to get out of the hermeneutical circle is to reach that point in reading a text where the reader can suddenly see how the given parts constitute a certain whole and not some other. In other words, we are out of the circle (that is, the impasse implied by its formulation) once we see that the parts and the whole which they constitute converge into a perfect harmony, a harmonious unit.

What I would append to the above is the related notion that we must **look at all the trees and see the forest anyway**. This invocation of the familiar adage ("You can't see the forest for the trees") is right on the money in the art of reading. It echoes the hermeneutical circle as well as the whole idea that though the evidence for a given interpretation is in the text, it is the text itself that needs interpreting in the first place. The trick is to learn to see the forest *because* of and not in spite of the trees.

It may seem that these few "rules" are easier stated than followed. But they are not impossible to learn, though (as always) to learn to apply them well, we must keep (as usual) an open as well as a flexible mind. No two combinations of words mean the same thing. And even the same combination may mean something different in a different context. "Sunrise" means one thing when a person tells a friend "Let's get up early tomorrow and watch the sunrise," and quite another in the song from *Fiddler on the Roof* ("Sunrise, sunset"), because what the song is talking about (though this is not what it says) is how quickly youth becomes age. A good rule of

thumb here is a statement made by Jonathan Culler, a literary critic, in one of his books: "Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless." Which means, as in the example about "sunrise," that whenever the context changes (and the context can change endlessly), the meaning changes, too, even if the words are otherwise the same.

Part III: More Than Just Understanding

Before going on to making a bold assertion now, let me recapitulate briefly what we have learned so far: in order to read well we must pay attention to the text and we must ignore ourselves (that is, put our egos on hold for the time being). We must not jump to conclusions. We must be open and flexible minded. We must try to do our best to construe the meaning of a text on the basis of what it says, keeping in mind that we don't get what it means, only what it says. It is understanding what a text says according to the relevant context (which is generated by the text) that will allow us to see what it means. The text gives us the words, we must see what the words mean. The text gives us the trees, if you will, but it is up to us to see the forest. If all the trees in the forest are pines, then the forest must be a pine forest, right? So far, so good.

The bold assertion I want to make now is to say that those who learn to read well, those who become good readers (who are what they read rather than merely read what they are), are also going to be, willy-nilly in some sense, more apt to be understanding, compassionate, sympathetic or empathic with respect to their fellow human beings than meets the eye. Notice how I am now playing on words here: when we understand a text well, we do more than merely understand the text, we tend to become more understanding in general, more understanding with respect to our fellow human beings than perhaps those who don't read well. One reason for this has already been stated: good readers are what they read. They are, in other words, capable of putting their own egos aside for the moment and concentrate wholly on the other, the text and (ultimately) the writer of the text. Good reading breeds unselfishness. Good readers develop good listening habits, too. They gain, eventually (and by force of habit, as it were) an uncanny ability to see and accept as possibly true or valid points of view other than their own. There is the old saying according to which to understand is to love. So be it.

I am not saying that all good readers will automatically become decent human beings simply because they are good readers. But I am saying that the habits of mind acquired by good reading are bound to have a salutary effect on our characters. Good readers, in other words, are not only going to be apt to see the facts of a case as they really are (rather than as they may wish them to be), for example, but they will also be open and flexible minded not to jump to conclusions prematurely, as well as not to confuse realms that ought to be kept separate. I have already touched upon this in my analysis of certain oxymorons. What we saw there is that no two sets of contradictory terms are contradictory in the same way. What we also saw is that, for the most part, most contradictions are apparent and apparent only. In other words, only the sublimely literal-minded would see nothing but contradictions in them.

Metaphors, too, must be taken with the proverbial grains of salt. They can be confusing at times (even if that is not their intention), but we can guard against being confused by them by paying careful attention to the contexts in which we encounter them, as well as by paying attention to the implications that may rise from them. Are the implications in question in harmony with everything else we can gather from a given text? There is a famous French novel by André Gide called *The Counterfeiters* in English. It is a novel about a novelist writing a novel about a novelist writing a novel. There is a scene in the novel where the protagonist, our first novelist (right after André Gide, of course) is shown a counterfeit coin. He is utterly fascinated by it. The apparent implication is unmistakable in the context of the novel (the first, the one written by André Gide): a counterfeit coin is to a real coin what a novel is to life. As long as a counterfeit coin is not detected to be counterfeit, it can pass for the real thing. Once it's detected, though, it becomes worthless as money (though it may retain value as a possible object of fascination). The question is, is Gide saying that novels are of value only as long as they are mistaken for reality? I doubt it. In fact, a novel about a novelist writing a novel about a novelist is too self-consciously novelistic, too arrogantly a fiction in your face, to try to pass itself off as real, even though ordinarily novels sound as if they were true stories. But we know all along that this is just owing to that "willing suspension of disbelief . . . which constitutes poetic faith."

So I will stick to my guns. Good reading will inculcate good mental habits in good readers who are, therefore, more apt to be understanding, compassionate, sympathetic, and empathic with respect to their fellow human beings than are bad readers or even non-readers, for that matter.

And this is more than a matter of merely identifying with characters. It is a matter of identifying with writers. I first encountered this idea in the work of a Russian author, Dmitry Sergeevitch Merezhkovsky, when I was a mere lad of 18. The statement that "many read, but few are readers" made quite a lasting impression upon me. The second part of the statement says: "In order to truly read, we must re-write the book with its author." The next time I encountered this idea many, many years later, was once again in the work of a Russian author, Vladimir Nabokov, who in his *Lectures on Russian Literature* says: "The good, the admirable reader identifies himself not with the boy or girl in the book, but with the mind that composed and conceived that book."

Part IV: The Ideological Divide

Here is something for your consideration: a shallow person reads a profound text and says that it's shallow. A profound person reads a shallow text and says that it's shallow. A shallow person reads a shallow text and says that it's profound. A profound person reads a profound text and says that it's profound. Note that the shallow person always gets it wrong, whereas the profound person always gets it right. In fact, the profound person may well err, too, but this would only happen because good reading is, among other things, an act of generosity. In other words, it is entirely possible for a profound person to see a shallow text as profound by seeing in it more than it contains, by seeing in it things that are not in it.

Strictly speaking, this "reading into" is something that bad rather than good readers do. They see things that aren't there. They jump to conclusions prematurely. They distort the texts that they read. A profound person seeing depth in a shallow text would seem, on the surface, to be guilty of the same bad reading habit. Again, the only excuse I can muster in favor of the profound person is to say that his or her mistake or error is due to an act of generosity. If we are bound to make mistakes every once in a while, let's pray that this is due to generosity rather than, say, mean-spiritedness.

Be that as it may, by comparing (at least in the abstract) profound with shallow texts and people, I have come upon a new consideration that will quickly take us beyond the ideal text or the ideal reader, which is what I have, in a sense, been dealing with so far. But what happens when, say, a

pro-life person comes upon a text advocating pro-choice? Wouldn't the pro-life person instantly reject the pro-choice text as being morally wrong? And would the pro-life person be wrong? I mean, from his or her own perspective? This is a glaring example of an ideological divide, but one that we must look squarely in the face. When people find each other in radically opposing camps, they usually fail to listen to each other or, at least, assume that nothing coming from the other side can possibly make them change their minds and/or convert them to the other way of thinking.

It is, however, still desirable to be good as opposed to be bad readers, but now an idea I haven't explicitly mentioned so far will have to be looked at, too. In another other essay of mine (also available on my Web site), "Fair Play vs. Fair Game," I quote extensively from a French critic, Georges Poulet, on reading. Poulet sees the reader as a person who completely gives him or herself over to the writer. The reader allows his or her consciousness to be completely taken over by the consciousness implied in the text and, ultimately, by the consciousness of the actual writer. Poulet, in his own person, talks of thinking thoughts as his own that actually belong to another, the writer he happens to be reading, but still thinking them in the process of reading as if they were his own. He uses the metaphor of "usurpation," for it's as if the reader were usurped by the writer.

This is in agreement with what I have been saying about good readers all along. Good readers are what they read. They identify with the writer. They become, at least for the duration of the reading, the writer. This is wonderful. This implies that when you read Shakespeare (and read him well), you are as good as Shakespeare, for at least the duration of your reading you *are*, in fact, Shakespeare. But Poulet doesn't stop with "usurpation" by the writer. He talks of a part of the reader that's not taken over, a part of the reader that steps back and watches the interaction between reader and writer like a hawk. This is the critical part of the reader, the part that will (if need be) disagree with the writer, should disagreement prove necessary.

Because all possible disagreements are not, in fact, as clear-cut as the disagreement between the pro-life and the pro-choice people, an attempt at good reading should always be made in good faith. In other words, for the most part, we should read with the risk of changing our minds with respect to many an issue as a direct result of reading certain texts. If we were not open to such

changes, we would be hopelessly locked into positions (right or wrong) from which it would be simply impossible to remove ourselves. One of my favorite "quotes" about this is as follows: "The person who never reads the same book twice, is destined to read the same book over and over again." This would be an example of a bad reader. Bad readers, remember, read what they are. In other words, no matter what they read, they keep finding the same thing (either in a positive or negative form, depending on the ideology of the writer they happen to be reading) - namely, confirmation of what they already believe, or a refutation of what they don't believe. In either case a mere reassurance that they have been "right" all along.

I placed the word "quote" in quotation marks above because the "quote" in question is not an exact quote. When I first "repeated" the words I was in a classroom and I didn't have the source with me. And I thought that I was quoting the words exactly. And I also gave credit to the author I thought I was quoting, Roland Barthes, the famous French critic. When I got home that evening, I was curious to see whether or not I had gotten the quote right and found that I hadn't. What Barthes actually says is that "those who fail to re-read are obliged to read the same story everywhere." Though I had unwittingly changed what the text says, I didn't really change what it means. This is, in a way, part of my point right now. The same position can be stated in many different ways. Different ways of formulating certain positions don't make any difference (though, of course, some ways may sound better or may be more esthetically pleasing). Differences begin to assert themselves only when it is the positions themselves that are different, at times even radically so.

I still say, though, that good reading practices ought to be maintained at all times, even when we find ourselves in the throes of disagreeable texts (and/or disagreeable writers). For there is only one way, ultimately, that any of us can truly earn the right to disagree, and that is by really understanding what the other is saying. So, as you can see, good reading is not going to turn us into push-overs. In other words, good readers are generous, but not credulous. They can be as tough-minded as possible. Provided that they can put their egos aside for the duration of the reading and provided that they don't jump to premature conclusions, they will read well and understand (though not, of course, love) even texts written by people they otherwise completely disagree with.

In the long run it simply behooves us to read well, whether we are reading something we agree with or not. In some cases we will change our minds. In others we won't. But there are a possibly infinite number of cases where the differences will prove to be less clear-cut than they first appear to be. If we were not open to the possibility of adjusting our views or even, under certain circumstances, of changing our minds, we would never grow. As I say in another essay of mine ("Unthinking Thinking," also available on my Web site), the enemy of critical thinking is habitual ways of thinking, the assumption that what we already know is all there is to a given subject. There isn't much virtue in being uneducable. According to one of my favorite quotes from one of my favorite American humorists, Josh Billings: "It is better to know nothing than to know what ain't so."