

## The Reading of the Unliterary

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We can easily contrast the purely musical appreciation of a symphony with that of listeners to whom it is primarily or solely the starting-point for things so inaudible (and therefore non-musical) as emotions and visual images. But there can never be, in the same sense, a purely literary appreciation of literature. Every piece of literature is a sequence of words; and sounds (or their graphic equivalent) are words precisely because they carry the mind beyond themselves. That is what being a word means. To be carried mentally through and beyond musical sounds into something inaudible and non-musical may be the wrong way of treating music. But to be similarly carried through and beyond words into something non-verbal and non-literary is not a wrong way of reading. It is simply reading. Otherwise we should say we were reading when we let our eyes travel over the pages of a book in an unknown language, and we should be able to read the French poets without learning French. The first note of a symphony demands attention to nothing but itself. The first word of the Iliad directs our minds to anger; something we are acquainted with outside the poem and outside literature altogether.

I am not here trying to prejudge the issue between those who say, and those who deny, that 'a poem should not mean but be'. Whatever is true of the poem, it is quite clear that the words in it must mean. A word which simply 'was' and didn't 'mean' would not be a word. This applies even to Nonsense poetry. Boojum in its context is not a mere noise. Gertrude Stein's 'a rose is a rose' if we thought it was 'arose is arose', would be different.

Every art is itself and not some other art. Every general principle we reach must, therefore, have a peculiar mode of application to each of the arts. Our next business is to discover the appropriate mode in which our distinction between using and receiving applies to reading. What, in the unliterary reader, corresponds to the unmusical listener's exclusive concentration on the 'top tune' and the use he makes of it? Our clue is the behaviour of such readers. It seems to me to have five characteristics.

1. They never, uncompelled, read anything that is not narrative. I do not mean that they all read fiction. The most unliterary reader of all sticks to 'the news'. He reads daily, with unwearied relish, how, in some place he has never seen, under circumstances which never become quite clear, someone he doesn't know has married, rescued, robbed, raped, or murdered someone else he doesn't know. But this makes no essential

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<sup>1</sup> From the book *An experiment in criticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1962.

difference between him and the class next above—those who read the lowest kinds of fiction. He wants to read about the same sorts of event as they. The difference is that, like Shakespeare's Mopsa, he wants to 'be sure they are true'. This is because he is so very unliterary that he can hardly think of invention as a legitimate, or even a possible activity. (The history of criticism shows that it took centuries to get Europe as a whole over this stile.)

2. They have no ears. They read exclusively by eye. The most horrible cacophonies and the most perfect specimens of rhythm and vocalic melody are to them exactly equal. It is by this that we discover some highly educated people to be unliterary. They will write 'the relation between mechanization and nationalization' without turning a hair.

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3. Not only as regards the ear but also in every other way they are either quite unconscious of style, or even prefer books which we should think badly written. Offer an unliterary twelve-year-old (not all twelve-year-olds are unliterary) 'Treasure Island' instead of the Boys' Bloods about pirates which are his usual fare, or offer Wells's First Men in the Moon to a reader of the infimal sorts of science fiction. You will often be disappointed. You give them, it would seem, just the sort of matter they want, but all far better done: descriptions that really describe, dialogue that can produce some illusion, characters one can distinctly imagine. They peck about at it and presently lay the book aside. There is something in it that has put them off.

4. They enjoy narratives in which the verbal element is reduced to the minimum—'strip' stories told in pictures, or films with the least possible dialogue.

5. They demand swift-moving narrative. Something must always be 'happening'. Their favourite terms of condemnation are 'slow', 'long-winded', and the like.

It is not hard to see the common source of these characteristics. As the unmusical listener wants only the Tune, so the unliterary reader wants only the Event. The one ignores nearly all the sounds the orchestra is actually making; he wants to hum the tune. The other ignores nearly all that the words before him are doing; he wants to know what happened next.

He reads only narrative because only there will he find an Event. He is deaf to the aural side of what he reads because rhythm and melody do not help him to discover who married (rescued, robbed, raped or murdered) whom. He likes 'strip' narratives and almost wordless films because in them nothing stands between him and the Event. And he likes speed because a very swift story is all events.

His preferences in style need a little more consideration. It looks as if we had here met a liking for badness as such, for badness because it is bad. But I believe it is not so.

Our own judgement of a man's style, word by word and phrase by phrase, seems to us to be instantaneous; but it must always in reality be subsequent, by however infinitesimal an interval, to the effect the words and phrases have on us. Reading in Milton 'chequered shade' we find ourselves imagining a certain distribution of lights and shadows with unusual vividness, ease, and pleasure. We therefore conclude that 'chequered shade' is good writing. The result proves the excellence of the means. The clarity of the object proves that the lens we saw it through is good. Or we read that

passage in Guy Mannering<sup>2</sup> where the hero looks at the sky and sees the planets each 'rolling' in its 'liquid orbit of light'. The image of planets visibly rolling or of visible orbits is so ludicrous that we do not even attempt to form it. Even if orbits is a blunder for 'orbs' we do not fare much better, for planets to the naked eye are not orbs nor even discs. We are presented with nothing but confusion. We therefore say that Scott was writing badly. This was a bad lens because we couldn't see through it. Similarly, from every sentence we read, our inner ear receives satisfaction or the reverse. On the strength of this experience we pronounce the author's rhythm to be good or bad.

It will be seen that all the experiences on which our judgements are based depend on taking the words seriously. Unless we are fully attending both to sound and sense, unless we hold ourselves obediently ready to conceive, imagine, and feel as the words invite us, we shall not have these experiences. Unless you are really trying to look through the lens you cannot discover whether it is good or bad. We can never know that a piece of writing is bad unless we have begun by trying to read it as if it was very good and ended by discovering that we were paying the author an undeserved compliment. But the unliterary reader never intends to give the words more than the bare minimum of attention necessary for extracting the Event. Most of the things which good writing gives or bad writing fails to give are things he does not want and has no use for.

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This explains why he does not value good writing. But it also explains why he prefers bad writing. In the picture stories of the 'strips' really good drawing is not only not demanded but would be an impediment. For every person or object must be instantly and effortlessly recognisable. The pictures are not there to be fully looked at but to be understood as statements; they are only one degree removed from hieroglyphics. Now words, for the unliterary reader, are in much the same position. The

hackneyed cliché for every appearance or emotion (emotions may be part of the Event) is for him the best because it is immediately recognisable. 'My blood ran cold' is a hieroglyph for fear. Any attempt, such as a great writer might make, to render this fear concrete in its full particularity, is doubly a chokepear to the unliterary reader. For it offers him what he doesn't want, and offers it only on condition of his giving to the words a kind and degree of attention which he does not intend to give. It is like trying to sell him something he has no use for at a price he does not wish to pay.

Good writing may offend him by being either too spare for his purpose or too full. A woodland scene by D. H. Lawrence or a mountain valley by Ruskin gives him far more than he knows what to do with; on the other hand, he would be dissatisfied with Malory's 'he arrived afore a castle which was rich and fair and there was a postern opened towards the sea, and was open without any keeping, save two lions kept the entry, and the moon shone clear'<sup>3</sup>. Nor would he be content with 'I was terribly afraid' instead of 'My blood ran cold'. To the good reader's imagination such statements of the bare facts are often the most evocative of all. But the moon shining clear is not enough for the unliterary. They would rather be told that the castle was 'bathed in a flood of silver moonlight'. This is partly because their attention to the words they read is so

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<sup>2</sup> Cap. 3, *ad fin.*

<sup>3</sup> Caxton, XVII, 14 (Vinaver, 1014).

insufficient. Everything has to be stressed, or ‘written up’, or it will barely be noticed. But still more, they want the hieroglyph—something that will release their stereotyped reactions to moonlight (moonlight, of course, as something in books, songs, and films; I believe that memories of the real world are very feebly operative while they read). Their way of reading is thus doubly and paradoxically defective. They lack the attentive and obedient imagination which would enable them to make use of any full and precise description of a scene or an emotion. On the other hand, they lack the fertile imagination which can build (in a moment) on the bare facts. What they therefore demand is a decent pretence of description and analysis, not to be read with care but sufficient to give them the feeling that the action is not going on in a vacuum—a few vague references to trees, shade and grass for a wood, or some allusion to popping corks and ‘groaning tales’ for a banquet. For this purpose, the more clichés the better. Such passages are to them what the backcloth is to most theatregoers. No one is going to pay any real attention to it, but everyone would notice its absence if it weren’t there. Thus good writing, in one way or the other, nearly always offends the unliterary reader. When a good writer leads you into a garden he either gives you a precise impression of that particular garden at that particular moment—it need not be long, selection is what counts—or simply says ‘It was in the garden, early’. The unliterary are pleased with neither. They call the first ‘padding’ and wish the author would ‘cut the cackle and get to the horses’. The second they abhor as a vacuum; their imaginations cannot breathe in it.

Having said that the unliterary reader attends to the words too little to make anything like a full use of them, I must notice that there is another sort of reader who attends to them far too much and in the wrong way. I am thinking of what I call Stylemongers. On taking up a book, these people concentrate on what they call its ‘style’ or its ‘English’. They judge this neither by its sound nor by its power to communicate but by its conformity to certain arbitrary rules. Their reading is a perpetual witch hunt for Americanisms, Gallicisms, split infinitives, and sentences that end with a preposition. They do not inquire whether the Americanism or Gallicism in question increases or impoverishes the expressiveness of our language. It is nothing to them that the best English speakers and writers have been ending sentences with prepositions for over a thousand years. They are full of arbitrary dislikes for particular words. One is ‘a word they’ve always hated’; another ‘always makes them think of so-and-so’. This is too common, and that too rare. Such people are of all men least qualified to have any opinion about a style at all; for the only two tests that are really relevant—the degree in which it is (as Dryden would say) ‘sounding and significant’—are the two they never apply. They judge the instrument by anything rather than its power to do the work it was made for; treat language as something that ‘is’ but does not ‘mean’; criticise the lens after looking at it instead of through it. It was often said that the law about literary obscenity operated almost exclusively against particular words, that books were banned not for their tendency but for their vocabulary and a man could freely administer the strongest possible aphrodisiacs to his public provided he had the skill—and what competent writer has not?—to avoid the forbidden syllables. The Stylemonger’s criteria, though for a different reason, are as wide of the mark as those of the law, and in the same way. If the mass of the people are unliterary, he is antiliterary. He creates in the minds of the unliterary (who have often suffered under him at school) a hatred of the very word style

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and a profound distrust of every book that is said to be well written. And if style meant what the Stylemonger values, this hatred and distrust would be right.

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The unmusical, as I have said, pick out the Top Tune; and they use it for humming or whistling and for launching themselves upon emotional and imaginative reveries. The tunes they like best are of course those which lend themselves most easily to such uses. The unliterary similarly pick out the Event—‘what happened’. The kinds of Event they like best and the uses they make of them go together. We can distinguish three main types.

They like what is called the ‘exciting’—imminent dangers and hair-breadth escapes. The pleasure consists in the continual winding up and relaxing of (vicarious) anxiety. The existence of gamblers shows that even an actual anxiety gives many people pleasure, or is at least a necessary ingredient in a pleasurable whole. The popularity of helter-skelters and the like shows that the sensations of fear, when separated from a conviction of real danger, are pleasurable. Hardier spirits seek real danger and real fear for pleasure’s sake; a mountain climber once said to me ‘A climb is no fun unless there has been one moment at which you have sworn that if once you get down alive you will never go up a mountain again’. There is no mystery about the unliterary man’s desire for ‘excitement’. We all share it. We all like to watch a race with a close finish.

Secondly, they like to have inquisitiveness aroused, prolonged, exasperated, and finally satisfied. Hence the popularity of stories with a mystery in them. This pleasure is universal and needs no explanation. It makes a great part of the philosopher’s, the scientist’s, or the scholar’s happiness. Also of the gossip’s.

Thirdly, they like stories which enable them—vicariously, through the characters—to participate in pleasure or happiness. These are of various kinds. They may be love stories, and these may be either sensual and pornographic or sentimental and edifying. They may be success stories. They may be stories about high life, or simply about wealthy and luxurious life. We had better not assume that the vicarious delights, in any of these kinds, are always substitutes for actual delights. It is not only the plain and unloved women who read the love stories; all who read success stories are not themselves failures.

I distinguish the kinds thus for clarity. Actual books for the most part belong not wholly, but only predominantly, to one or other of them. The story of excitement or mystery usually has a ‘love interest’ tacked on to it, often perfunctorily. The love story or the idyll or High Life has to have some suspense and anxiety in it, however trivial these may be.

Let us be quite clear that the unliterary are unliterary not because they enjoy stories in these ways, but because they enjoy them in no other. Not what they have but what they lack cuts them off from the fulness of literary experience. These things ought they to have done and not left others undone. For all these enjoyments are shared by good readers reading good books. We hold our breath with anxiety while the Cyclops gropes over the ram that bears Odysseus, while we wonder how Phèdre (and Hippolyte) will react to the unexpected return of Thésée, or how the disgrace of the Bennet family will affect Darcy’s love for Elizabeth. Our inquisitiveness is strongly excited by the first part of *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* or the change in General Tilney’s behaviour. We long to discover Pip’s unknown benefactor in *Great Expectations*. In Spenser’s *House of Busirane* every stanza whets our curiosity. As for

the vicarious enjoyment of imagined happiness, the mere existence of the Pastoral gives it a respectable place in literature. And elsewhere too, though we do not demand a happy ending to every story, yet when such an ending occurs and is fitting and well executed, we certainly enjoy the happiness of the characters. We are even prepared to enjoy vicariously the fulfilment of utterly impossible wishes, as in the statue scene from the *Winter's Tale*; for what wish is so impossible as the wish that the dead to whom we have been cruel and unjust should live again and forgive us and 'all be as before'? Those who seek only vicarious happiness in their reading are unliterary; but those who pretend that it can never be an ingredient in good reading are wrong.