



# 1

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading: “Of Ourselves and of Our Origins”*

### **Reading as an Odyssey**

I shall be writing about happens when we read or what I call the odyssey of reading, and I shall be doing so at terms of what for me has been my own exciting odyssey of reading. I write not only as a literary scholar but as a lifetime reader inquiring into why we read, and like Odysseus, who learned a great deal from his wanderings, I hope I offer something from my long experience.

What exactly is reading but the journey of the mind to understand a world beyond itself? While we need think about what happens when we read any kind of text or go to a film or a concert—or come to terms with a painting in a museum—my concern is with imaginative literature and what we do when we read that literature and how that relates to how we teach literature.

Two of my passions are travel and reading and they have much in common. It happens one of the genres in which I myself have recently been writing is travel-writing and I want to apply some of that to this discussion. Our experience through a text is a kind of journey. What I mean by my title is that a journey through texts is always a journey we share with authors, but it is also one we take alone. With their complexities and traps, their seeming interpretive solutions undermined by further problems, their potential for leading us astray,



## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

arresting our progress with puzzling moments, and their capacity for opening our eyes, these journeys are odysseys.

Complex texts that present difficulties and frustrations, texts such as *Moby Dick* and *Ulysses*, tend to make reading a journey with setbacks and challenges. Like the protagonist undergoing the quest, we are often buffeted about and need to stop frequently, particularly when these texts are long, but when we pick up the text we resume our journey. The destination of our odyssey of reading—the conclusion of the journey as we reach home—is the moment when we close the text after its last word. But, in a sense, that is also the beginning of another odyssey, namely the odyssey of reflection. When we complete a major odyssey of reading, we know that reading is a way we come to know ourselves.

We need think of our readings as odysseys with their own beginnings and endings or, in contemporary terms with their own take-offs and landings, departures and arrivals. When we begin a book, we seal ourselves off from other worlds, just as when take a trip to a different society. As I wrote one of my published poems entitled “Travel”:

### **Travel**

is for me hermetic,  
an ordering: each trip  
a life, with its own defined  
beginning and ending,  
an escape from  
thick textures  
of adult life—heavy weights  
of work and relationships.  
Travel is world  
out of time:  
anxieties controlled,  
mortality put off,  
attention distracted.  
Trip is oasis,  
an abbreviated lifetime,  
sealing world

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

from intrusion,  
creating space  
of two spare,  
bare weeks.

If I change the words “travel” and “trip” to reading, wouldn’t we have an apt description of what we do as readers? Each of our reading odysseys is different, just as no two people take the same trip to India even if they are on the same tour or make the same trip to Paris even if they sleep in the same bed. I grew up in a world where we pretended that if we as a seminar or a group of colleagues talked about a book enough our readings would be the close to the same, but we now know that each of us brings our own prior experience—reading and otherwise—and our own psyche and values to our odyssey of reading.

Reading is a kind of travel, an imaginative voyage undertaken while sitting still. Reading is immersion; reading is reflection. Reading takes us elsewhere, away from where we live to other places. We read to satisfy our curiosity about other times and places, to garner information about what is happening in the world beyond our lives, to gather the courage to try new things even while considering admonitions not to try dangerous ones, and to learn about experiences we might try in the future. Our reading helps formulate narratives—of personal hopes, plans, putative triumphs—that help us both to understand our pasts and to make plans for our futures. As Wallace Stevens put it in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” words enable us to discover “ourselves and our origins” and perhaps to experience what Stevens calls “ghostlier demarcations” and “keener sounds” than we may find in our own lives.

We read for information that we need and seek. We read because we are curious and wish to learn other ways of organizing life not only in our own culture but also in others. We read to supplement our life experience, and that surely includes reconfiguring the values we are taught. When reading, we extend our horizons; we come to understand what it is like to be of a different gender, race, and class, to have a different psyche. We read for company when we are lonely, for solace

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

when we are in pain, and to recuse ourselves from the painful, sad and lonely world we at times live in—a world that can be fraught with political and personal problems. We read, paradoxically, to rest from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the challenges, of our lives and to become more alert to those challenges.

We read not only to alleviate pain but also for amusement. We read to relax from the pressures and pleasures of our everyday world. We read also to delight ourselves, to vicariously share pleasures, joys, sensuality, and passion. Reading, we must not forget, is also a kind of play. We read to enjoy the pleasure of words, their sensuality and materiality, the smells and tastes and visions they evoke, the desires they elicit, the laughter as well as the tears and even physical disgust and pain they arouse.

To be sure, some reading can be complex and difficult reading, requiring an effort beyond that of watching TV or even scanning the Internet. For example, Holocaust narratives or novels, or memoirs about growing up black in America, take us into worlds that fascinate us and that give breadth and depth to our emotional lives, but from which we may be glad to return to our own world. What each of us finds painful varies, for each of us reads differently depending on our experience.

We need recognize continuity between reading imaginative and non-imaginative literature. We can never afford to be either passive detached readers or, alternatively, completely empathetic readers and who suspend our judgment when listening to or reading speeches from our political leaders or reading articles in the *New York Times*. Even when we read to seek information we are aware whether the text is well organized or flaccid, efficiently succinct or prolix, lucid or opaque, logically argued or simply asserting what its author wants us to believe. And we need to discover the author's own underlying assumptions, idiosyncrasies, and perhaps biases.

Different readers will have different responses depending on their reading and life experience. As postmodernists we are skeptical, suspicious, and even cynical readers because we frequently see truth claims made for texts—truth claims that prove to be false, whether it be George W. Bush's claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq,

The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading

or exaggerated claims of truth by supposed memoirists. We become wary readers and at times take on the role of detectives. An experienced reader of Holocaust texts should have been suspicious of Benjamin Wilkomirski's supposed Holocaust memoir, *Fragments*—which I suspected because of its excesses as being a fraud even when it was winning awards—especially if the reader knows about the history of Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, an early Holocaust account that originally was presented as autobiography.

We also read to confirm who we are, even as we think we are reading to supplement who we are. Certainly women writers and readers respond differently than men to Virginia Woolf's discussion of a woman writer's needs in *A Room of One's Own*, or to Mrs. Dalloway's being reduced to a kind of social adjunct to her husband's life, but I, too, can understand Mrs. Dalloway's loneliness, her fears of death, and the irony of her social triumph at the novel's final party.

Optimists can find reinforcement for their views in William Wordsworth's joy in life. Self-help books can help restore physical health and esteem. Religious books can help give the disorder of life some order. Depressives can find reinforcement in reading about other depressives or by reading writers who believe, like Thomas Hardy, that, all things being equal, things will turn out badly. Reading can do damage by pushing psychopaths, sociopaths and even severely depressed people over the edge. Well-read suicides have cryptically quoted passages from literature in their last notes; one well-known scholar is reputed to have included in his suicide note famous lines from *King Lear* (V.ii.9–13):

Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;  
Ripeness is all.

Perhaps we all need be wary of such overly empathetic reading.

Reading certainly enables an informed citizenry and sometimes creates a misinformed one. Certainly information about the Vietnam War, the scandal that became known as Watergate, the non-existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq raised the consciousness of

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*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Americans. Certainly knowing about how humans lived in the recent and ancient past helps us understand who we are and how to proceed. Reading about the Holocaust and slavery helps shape our ethical sensitivity.

Mark Edmundson writes, in “The Risk of Reading” (*New York Times Magazine*, August 1, 2004, 11–12),

The best way to think about reading is as life’s grand second chance. All of us grow up once; we pass through a process of socialization [...]. Yet for many people, the process of socialization doesn’t quite work. The values they acquire from all the well-meaning authorities don’t fit them. And it is these people who often become obsessed readers [...]. They read to be socialized again, not into the ways of their city or village this time but into another world with different values. Some people want to revise, or even to displace, the influence their parents have had on them.

As reader, critic, teacher, and poet, I would subscribe to James Wood’s idealistic view of the implicit contract between artist and reader (D3, “Ideas&Books,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 15, 2004):

[W]hat I am most interested in is what we might nebulously call human truth—a true account of the world, as we experience it, and of the full difficulty of being in that world. Creating living characters, and writing fiction expressing what Henry James called ‘the present palpable intimate’ entails, for me at least, some kind of morality. Requiring readers to put themselves into the minds of many different kinds of other people is a moral action on the part of the author.

I would extend Wood’s remark to apply to poetry, drama, and perhaps even serious non-fiction.

My codicil to Wood’s Leavisite focus on bracing moralism and tangible realism would be that we need to remember that such terms as “human truth,” “authenticity” and “knowledge” mean different things to different people and that the largest community of readers is one. W.H. Auden’s line, “‘O Where are you going?’ said reader to rider” with a pun on writer reminds us that the writer is a guide but that each reader undertakes his or her own journey (“The Three Companions”).

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Indeed, the rider (writer) in frustration with a probing and resistant interlocutor—that is, the reader—would banish the reader from his premises (“‘Out of this house’—said rider to reader”).

Reading is a dialogue between reader and writer; readers bring their imaginations, memories, thinking processes, moral and social values, historical knowledge, and prior experiences to every text. Veryln Klinkenborg, in an Editorial Observer piece in the *New York Times* entitled “Reading Thackeray’s ‘Vanity Fair’ with the Illustrations Intact,” (A18, Monday, August 30, 2004) perceptively remarks: “Good readers, of course, bring the kinetics of imagination to the text. And compared with the genuine collaboration that exists between readers and a writer, the dynamism of hypertext, for instance, looks preposterously mechanical.”

He rightly cites the intrusive voice of *Vanity Fair* manipulating his fictional puppets as an example of this collaboration: “Thackeray met his readers more than halfway. He is an interlocutor in his novel as much as its narrator. He patrols the scenes of ‘Vanity Fair’—London high and low, the battle of Waterloo, the prosperous ducal town of Pumpernickel—happy to intervene when a point needs clarifying, eager to field readers’ comments even as the novel is unfolding” (A18). Whether we consider William Makepeace Thackeray’s wonderful illustrations to be the work of the narrative voice or that of an illustrating presence outside the text, we can agree with Klinkenborg’s comments on the dialogue between Thackeray’s texts and illustrations: “They pop up with the lightness of touch, the glibness, that characterizes Thackeray as a writer at his best. They are comments, often ironic, on the pictures developing in a reader’s mind.”

But we need keep in mind that there are many other kinds of collaboration between author and reader. The collaboration between author and reader can be one in which the author invites the reader to share his views of an unreliable imperceptive narrator as in James Joyce’s “Araby” or, more flagrantly, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell Tale Heart.” In “Araby,” Joyce expects us to see what the narrator, slightly older than the younger self whose experience of frustrated desire and religious guilt is the subject of the story, does not see—namely that he is locked into a Catholic epistemology that confines him and that he is

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

prone to hyperbolic responses—on occasion rendered in purple prose—reflecting his youth.

A resistant reader, while acknowledging Joseph Conrad's 1899 version of passionate anti-colonialism when *Heart of Darkness* was written, may still refuse to collaborate in what now seems Conrad's racist or sexist views in *Heart of Darkness*. The reader may join Chinua Achebe (1977) in realizing that not only is Conrad's critique of imperialism woefully incomplete, but he may, remembering how important exposing King Leopold of Belgium's imperialism was to European history, forgive Conrad for not being fully aware of the implications of that critique in terms of our understanding of racism. While Kurtz's nationality is never specified and the British are spared from Conrad's condemnation, *Heart of Darkness* is a visionary text that awakened the world to the abuses of King Leopold of Belgium's exploitation of the Congo and, by implication, colonial imperialism.

We need to think, too about how we visualize when we read. I myself do not have a full photographic picture when I read unless I dream about the novel, but I know other readers are more visual. Thus my imagination of a novel like *Vanity Fair* is as cognitive and reflective as it is visual if not more so. How many people remember the color details of clothing in a realistic novel? What more of us we remember is the social and moral dimensions of character, the personality of characters, how they speak, the presence and tone of the narrative voice, and the broad outlines of setting—especially the qualities emphasized, like the fog of *Bleak House*, and the gloomy nighttime of *The Secret Agent*.

### **The Continuity between Reading and Writing**

By citing one of my own poems—and, while I have published fifty or so poems, I have no illusions that my own poetry is more than a drop in the literary ocean—I am suggesting a continuity between reading and writing.

I think most imaginative writers write primarily when they need to delve into their psyches and discover who they are and, secondarily

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

but still importantly, when they need share the results of that process with others. They—we—use words to understand ourselves and the world we live in. Let me turn to the Turkish 2006 Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk on the role of the writer in transforming words from real life into imagined worlds (2007, 82–3):

A writer is someone who spends years patiently trying to discover the second being inside him, and the world that makes him who he is [...]. To write is to transform that inward gaze into words, to study the world into which we pass when we retire into ourselves, and to do so with patience, obstinacy, and joy. [...] But once we have shut ourselves away we soon discover that we are not as alone as we thought. We are in the company of the words of those who came before us, of other people's stories, other people's books—the thing we call tradition.

What I find striking in these eloquent words is how they describe the activities not only of the writer but also of the reader. Let me revisit these passages substituting the word reader for writer to stress how the reader, too, is engaged in the introspective, imaginative quest—odyssey if you will—for understanding:

A *reader* is someone who spends years patiently trying to discover the second being inside him, and the world that makes him who he is [...]. To read is to transform that inward gaze into words, to study the world into which we pass when we retire into ourselves, and to do so with patience, obstinacy, and joy. [...] But once we have shut ourselves away we soon discover that we are not as alone as we thought. We are in the company of the words of those who came before us, of other people's stories, other people's books—the thing we call tradition. I believe literature to be the most valuable tool that humanity has found in its quest to understand itself.

When we read we descend into ourselves, not unlike writers. If I may return to Pamuk (2007, 83, 90):

I believe literature to be the most valuable tool that humanity has found in its quest to understand itself [...]. For me, to be a writer is to

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

acknowledge that the secret wounds that we carry inside us, wounds so secret that we ourselves are barely aware of them, and to patiently explore them, know them, illuminate them, own them, and make them a conscious part of our spirit and our writing.

Doesn't reading also discover the deeply buried self—the fixations and obsessions, the dark memories, the pain we barely recognize—what Pamuk calls the “secret wounds” and create a persona different from our every day social self?

My point is that the reader's odyssey mirrors that of the writer and we read not only to complement our experience, but also to discover who we really are. When we read fully and passionately and with rapt attention, do we not discover our secret selves, probe deeply into our psyches? Let me return to my last Pamuk quotation and once again make my substitution of reader for writer:

For me, to be a *reader* is to acknowledge that the secret wounds that we carry inside us, wounds so secret that we ourselves are barely aware of them, and to patiently explore them, know them, illuminate them, own them, and make them a conscious part of our spirit and our reading.

What I am arguing is that we overestimate the distinction between reader and writer. I think an active, passionate, imaginative reader responds to words with joy, and it is not surprising that many of our great writers—Jorge Luis Borges, T.S. Eliot, Stevens, and Joyce—are also perspicacious readers. Joyce understood the continuity of reading and writing when he has the jejune Stephen Dedalus think, in the opening line of the third episode of *Ulysses*, “Signatures of all things I am here to read.” We might note that the third episode is appropriately called “Proteus” to emphasize how Stephen needs discover how words are transformed into worlds.

Readers and writers share a belief in language and a belief that if we can only find the right words, we can communicate. They believe in the capacity of the human mind to understand, and believe, despite

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*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

all our failings, that we need others—family, friends, community—and that words are essential to the way we connect to others.

Who is a serious reader? A serious reader is a person for whom literature—imaginative and serious non-fiction—matter, and for whom literature is not simply something to be skimmed as a pretext for finding ideas for essays and conversations but rather as an opportunity to enter empathetically into—depending on the text—the author’s imagination, memory, value system, historical milieu, indeed, way of being present at a particular time and place.

When we enter as odyssean readers into an imagined world, we become involved with what Nadine Gordimer has called “the substance of living from which the artist draws his vision,” and our criticism must speak to that “substance of living” (Gordimer 1981, no pag.). In Third World and postcolonial literature—and in politically engaged texts such as Elie Wiesel’s *Night* or Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table*—this involvement is particularly intense. Thus the interest in postcolonial and Third World literature—perhaps accelerated by Wole Soyinka’s and Derek Wolcott’s Nobel prizes—challenged some tenets of deconstruction. Literature written at the political edge reminds us what literature has always been about: urgency, commitment, tension, and feeling. Indeed, at times have we not transferred those emotions to parochial critical and theoretical debate among ourselves rather than to our responses to literature?

While it may not be completely irrelevant to talk about gaps, fissures, and enigmas and about the free play of signifiers in the poetry of Wally Serote (“Death Survey”) and Don Mattera (“Singing Fools”), we must focus, too, on these authors as persecuted blacks in the former regime of South Africa, and the pain and alienation that they felt in the face of persecution. Nadine Gordimer has written—and Joyce might have said the same thing about Ireland—“It is from the daily life of South Africa that there have come the conditions of profound alienation which prevail among South African artists” (Gordimer, “The Arts in Adversity”).

When discussing politically engaged literature—be it Soyinka, Gordimer, Wiesel, or Levi—we need to recuperate historical circumstances and understand the writer’s ordering of that history in his

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

imagined world. We need to know not merely what patterns of provisional representation are created by language but the historical, political, and social ground of that representation. We need to be open to hearing the often unsophisticated and unironical voice of pain, angst, and fear.

### **Reading as a Culture**

What we read as a culture tells us who we are as American people and is therefore an ingredient of cultural studies. What various communities read—whether ethnic, professional, social communities, academic departments, reading clubs—helps define that group's values and identity. What we read in an academic format tells us, at a particular moment in time, what kind of university or department we are or wish to be. Various ethnic and religious subgroups read different books. Cultural conflict is often enacted in a battle of the books.

Reading makes us better citizens. What we read in biography, history and fiction, not only teaches us about diverse politicians and their illusions, delusions, accomplishments, and vanity, but also enables us to see cultural conflict. We want to see how the minds of others work—authors and their subjects—and what values they live by. In a puzzling world where statesmen and leaders do not say what they mean, we wonder if they even know what are lies; in any case, we read as part of our quest to understand. Whether a poem or a novel or an Opposite-Editorial piece, we read to supplement our experience, modify who we are, and, if we are moved or touched, perhaps reconfigure our beliefs and feelings.

What each of us reads individually tells us who we are in terms of our own separate and special identity. We define ourselves by what we read and what we choose not to read—our desires, our needs, our demands, our disappointments, our fixations, our obsessions.

Bestseller lists—including self-help books, books about successful investing as well as books about dieting, health and aging, fashion, political autobiography, celebratory hagiography—open a window

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*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

on who we are and who we expect to be. We enjoy learning about the lives of the rich and famous—the restaurants they eat at, their galas, and the gossip about their love-life—even while clinging to a democratic vision and belief in meritocracy. Among other things, the books we read and films we see show that we want a world of ethnic diversity and choices, yet we don't want to abandon certain Rockwellian myths of what America was.

While there are notable exceptions and serious reading groups, most reasonably literate Americans—indeed, former university students—spend a good deal of their fiction reading time on page-turners such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* rather than dense texts like the Portuguese Nobel laureate's José Saramago's *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*. Even erudite academics read fiction—mysteries, science fiction—for a good story and escapism.

A survey released a few years ago by the National Endowment of the Arts (“Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America,” June 2004) showed that reading for pleasure had declined in the United States. Paradoxically, the survey shows that readers are more active participants in the community—more likely to perform volunteer and charity work, to go to museums and concerts, and to attend sporting events than non-readers. In an Op.-Ed. piece in the *New York Times* entitled “The Closing of the American Book,” Andrew Solomon contends (July 10, 2004, 17):

There is a basic social divide between those for whom life is an accrual of fresh experience, and those for whom maturity is a process of mental atrophy. [...] You are what you read. If you read nothing, then your mind withers, and your ideals lose their vitality and sway [...]. We need to teach people not only how, but also why to read. The struggle is not to make people read more, but to make them *want* to read more.

If we agree with Solomon that reading opens the doors and windows of our minds to fresh experience, isn't our challenge as teachers to take part in a spirited defense of the joys of serious reading? We read to see how the world looks from other points of view and to

### *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

complement our own limited experience. We read to enter in other places and time, to transport ourselves in to a different world as if on a magic carpet. As postmodernists desperately trying to know others, we read to overcome our fears of unknowability—that we cannot know others and others cannot know us.

A community of engaged readers engaged with serious books becomes, as individuals respond to the book and define its cultural and individual meaning, a community of inquiry. This takes place for canonical texts and serious bestsellers such as Al Gore's book on global warming entitled *An Inconvenient Truth*.

### **What Is Literary Meaning? Responding to and Resisting the Author's Values**

Literary meaning depends on a dialogue among: 1) authorial intention and interest; 2) the formal text produced by the author for a specific historical audience; and 3) the responses of a particular reader in a specific time. Literary texts mediate and condense anterior worlds and authors' psyches. The condensation is presented by words, words that are a web of signs that signify something beyond themselves; within a text, words signify differently. Some words and phrases almost summon a visible presence; others are elusive or even may barely matter in the terms of representation—as in Joyce's encyclopedic catalogues in "Cyclops."

The context of any discourse determines the meaning—or should we say the epistemological and semiological value of the word or sentence? And once we use the word "value," are we not saying that words have an ethical quotient? Human agency—on the part of author, reader, or characters within real or imagined worlds—derives in part from will, from the idiosyncrasies of human psyche and, in part, from cultural forces beyond the control of the individual. That is another way of saying that language is constituted and constituting, although it gives subjective human agency to the act of constituting. While we need, as resistant readers, to be alert to the implications of racist, sexist, classist, and anti-Semitic nuances, we also need to stress reading the words on the page in terms of the demands made by the text's

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

context and form—in particular, by its structure of effects or what I have called the “Doesness” of the text.

If awareness of oneself and one’s relationship to family and community—including one’s responsibilities, commitments, and values—is part of the ethical life, then reading contributes to greater self-understanding. Reading complements one’s experience by enabling us to live lives beyond those we live and experience emotions that are not ours; it heightens our perspicacity by enabling us to watch figures—tropes, that is, personifications of our fellow humans—who are not ourselves, but like ourselves.

Rather than being divorced from life—our reading experience, if we read actively and with intelligence, is central to life and contributes to the development of the mature personality. Literature provides surrogate experiences for the reader, experiences which, because they are embodied within artistically shaped ontologies that shape our responses by means of their structure of effects, heighten our awareness of moral discriminations. Yet, I suggest, what distinguishes literature from moral philosophy is literature’s specificity, its nominalism, and its dramatized particularity.

Literature raises ethical questions, ones that enable us to consider not only how we would behave in certain circumstances, but also whether—even as we empathetically read a text—we should maintain some stance of resistance by which to judge that text’s ethical implications. While some artistic experiences allow more of a moral holiday than others, even abstract art finally needs to be recuperated in human terms and thematic issues. Literature calls upon us to respond fully, viscerally, with every dimension of our psychological and moral being.

Let us turn to an example where literature demands a response. When T.S. Eliot’s speaker in the first verse paragraph of his dramatic monologue “Gerontion” (1920) derides in most derogatory terms “the jew”—drawing upon a rhetoric of insult to milk the stereotype of the Jew—we respond in multiple ways:

I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Bitten by flies, fought.  
My house is a decayed house,  
And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.  
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;  
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.  
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,  
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.

Devoting three lines to derogate the landlord with onomatopoeic verbs and participles—“squats,” “spawned,” “blistered,” “patched,” and “peeled”—is a gross example of the rhetoric of insult, prejudice, and defamation. Jews are not only associated in the passage with disease and decay, but with lust and defecation. We stop and consider what this tells us about the narrator, whether we can attribute the words to an imperceptive speaker, whether the author is ironic, whether the narrative of modernism adequately takes account of Eliot’s anti-Semitism, whether a formal analysis that ignores a critique of the early twentieth century cultural context in which such language was permissible and even acceptable, and, finally, whether the focus on formalism caused critics of the next several decades after publication to ignore the inflammatory nature of this image—despite the Holocaust.

Texts demand ethical responses from their readers in part because *saying* always has an ethical dimension and because we are our values and we never take a moral holiday from our values. We can no more ignore the ethical implications of what we read than we can ignore the ethical implications of life. But how does one discuss how one reads ethically (and how do we teachers bring that ethical dimension into our classroom) without imposing our own values? Ethical questions have usually focused on character behavior in prose fiction and drama, but clearly seduction lyrics such as Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” or megalomaniac pronouncements such as that of the speaker of Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” raise issues about the speaker’s human behavior that need be addressed.

## **Why We Read**

We read to discover the conscious and unconscious patterns of language that the author built into a text because those patterns usually convey a vision of how humans live. We should read literature as an imagined representation of historical events and human behavior. Human behavior is central to most works and should be the major concern of analysis. Thus a major interest to readers is in how fictional people behave—what they fear, desire, doubt, need—fiction including poetry and drama as well as novels and stories. Although modes of characterization differ, the psychology and morality of characters need to be understood as if they were real people; for understanding others like ourselves helps us to understand ourselves. Even the seeming exceptions prove the rule: complex plots enact and represent human actions; descriptive poems reflect the perspective of an observer.

We need always remember that literary works are by humans, about humans, and for humans. A place is once again being cleared for literary criticism informed but not driven by theoretical hypotheses. Such criticism necessarily will emphasize modes of narration and representation. Literary criticism necessarily depends on an awareness of what, in the transaction of reading, a particular reader does to a text. We need a pluralistic approach, which allows for multiple perspectives and a dialogic approach among those perspectives. Such a criticism leaves room for resistant readings—feminist, ethnic, and gay—without allowing the text to be appropriated by theoretical or political agendas. It means teaching our students that reading is an evolving process requiring attention to what the text is saying, to the structure of effects the text generates, and to how authors make conscious and unconscious choices to create their structure of effects.

## **Interpretive History and Meaning**

Let us think about how interpretive history affects the meaning of a text. An aesthetics of reading need account for changes in the way we

### *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

read an author or what we call interpretive history. In a sense, a text changes even though the author writes no more words. The interpretive history of a text—which is different from its meaning—depends on three factors: 1) the text as an object which critics write about; 2) the subjective interests of individual critics; and 3) the predisposition and assumptions of the culture in which those critics write. The interpretive history of a text is the history of its odysseys of reading as shaped by culture but also by the critics. The value of the theoretical revolution has been that it created new odysseys of reading, although at times it distracted us from the text as an ontology—what I call its “Isness”—and to how a text creates through the process of reading a particular response—the Doesness of the text as opposed to its Isness. But at its best the theoretical explosions created new maps of reading that have guided us on different journeys.

The literary canon enriches itself because each generation brings something different to major authors and texts. As my teaching has evolved in response to changes in literary and cultural perspectives, the texts that I teach have changed as well.

Let me cite an example of how the odyssey of reading a canonical text has changed. Until 1980 few critics thought about the homoeroticism of the male bonding in Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*; now it is a foregrounded subject; thus, in my edition of *The Secret Sharer* in the Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism series, every contributor—James Phelan, Bonnie Kim Scott, Michael Levenson, J. Hillis Miller, and myself—took up the subject in one way or another. I now also see *The Secret Sharer* in the context of other works which focus on seeing and being seen, including Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, and trace that focus back to the seminal nineteenth-century painter, Édouard Manet, and especially *Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe*. While I have always read *The Secret Sharer* as a confessional psychodrama requiring psychological and at times a Freud-based psychoanalytic criticism, the insights of Jacques Lacan on the gaze also play a role in my current response. Finally I see continuity between *The Secret Sharer* and other novels of bachelor figures at the turn of the century, a period that regarded bachelors with a certain suspicion as insidious and even pernicious threats within the social order.

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

What the example from *The Secret Sharer* shows is that we need to think of cultural criticism as a verb—not as a noun that names positions but as a process—or as an odyssean journey of inquiring, teaching, and reading. Cultural criticism also needs to address the category of the aesthetic and its relationship to the political and the ethical. Now that literary studies have returned in the past decade to a criticism that focuses on contexts, we need to ask what is the place of the aesthetic in cultural criticism, why do we find some works beautiful, moving, and pleasing, and why do we respond to the quality and integrity of mimesis—the way the parts of a work are unified—as well as other formal ingredients of a work, including narrative voice, verbal texture, and characterization. How can we speak of ethical and political value without surrendering the value of the aesthetic? We do not have to subscribe to the view that all art is a separate ontology, its value intrinsic to itself, to ask how we can maintain a place for the aesthetic. Indeed, in his concept of catharsis, Aristotle focused on the role of the perceiver and insisted on the role of the structure of effects, on what the work does to the reader, as central to its aesthetic.

I have been in my own work—mostly in the field of high modernism but also in the area of Holocaust narratives—explicitly and implicitly proposing the ingredients of a humanistic cultural criticism that has a place for the aesthetic. It seeks to define cultural configurations that go beyond positivistic influence studies, and stresses recreating the economic, social, and political world authors inhabit. It tries to show an awareness of the cultural position of the critic and to understand interpretive history as a history of awareness—of aesthetic assumptions, political interests, and world views—but also as an idiosyncratic history of individual critics. While retaining a place for the aesthetic, humanistic criticism seeks a dialogue among various social, economic, and historical factors, between literature and history, between literature and the arts.

### **The Power of Reading: Raising the Stakes**

Anyone doubting the value of reading texts needs to read Azar Nafisi's *Reading 'Lolita' in Tehran: A Memoir* (2003), a text in which she

### *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

foregrounds the human experience of the odyssey of reading. Nafisi speaks eloquently of the power of books to transform lives at a time in Tehran when many universities are closed and western canonical texts forbidden. What her book teaches us is that books have urgency and significance by raising crucial issues that touch on our very lives. She writes compellingly about defending *The Great Gatsby* at a mock trial after one of her male students complained that the novel was immoral because the characters are shallow and materialistic, a complaint raised because the student believed that “novels and their characters became our models in real life” (Nafisi 2003, 129). The mock trial becomes a teaching device to open the doors and windows of her students’ minds to cultural differences and similarities.

Nafisi sees herself learning Gatsby’s lesson (144):

He wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end he discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future. Was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream?

Gatsby’s dream, like the revolution of the Ayatollahs, had become a consuming obsession; and like both Gatsby and the Ayatollahs, the purity of the dream makes it impossible to distinguish fantasy from reality.

Nafisi eloquently argues for what *The Great Gatsby* has in common with the other novels her group has been reading together (131):

Imagination in these works is equated with empathy; we can’t experience all that others have gone through, but we can understand even the more monstrous individuals in works of fiction. A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice. [...] Empathy lies at the heart of [*The Great Gatsby*]; the biggest sin is to be blind to others’ problems and pains.

When the stakes are high, we tend to remember why *we do read*; indeed it is those occasions that bring a humanistic ethos to the fore.

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Zarrin, one of Nafisi's students, understand that Tom, Daisy, and Jordan are "careless" people in that they lack the capacity to care about others, as opposed to Gatsby who cares too much, but only about one person and is careless about others. Careless of truth, Jordan compulsively lies and cheats. Indeed Nick's name "Carraway"—Care Away (that is, throw cares away or be oblivious to) or Carried Away (that is to care too much as Nick does for Gatsby) reminds us of Nick's sometimes similarity to and sometimes difference from Gatsby.

What I like about Nafisi's text is that she shows her students—and us—what reading can mean. What she does is let them see into a world of personal relationships and their cost. While Gatsby's taking the blame for Daisy's running down Myrtle Wilson is his ultimate personal sacrifice, Nafisi's students have only been taught to measure sacrifice by such words as "masses," "revolution," and "Islam" (108–9): "Passion and betrayal were for them political emotions and love an emotion supposed to be far removed from the stirrings of Jay Gatsby for Mrs. Tom Buchanan. Adultery in Tehran was one of so many other crimes, and the law dealt with it accordingly: public stoning."

After reading Nafisi, I was and am affected by my reading in ways that transcend reading as an exercise or verbal game. Even now when I read "Benito Cerino," I am moved beyond measure by the incredible optimism and poignant blindness of Captain Amaso Delano who so desperately wants to see a harmonious universe and, like Gatsby, confuses dreams with reality.

Great texts can be read and reread many times over a lifetime, and each reading is a new odyssey of discovery. In a sense we are Gatsby always in our reading looking for the green light, the wonderful "orgiastic future that year by year recedes into the past." What I have learned is that we read to discover the absolutes that in our relative world—what Nick Carraway calls "the old unknown world"—only to discover with Nick and Gatsby that they are undiscoverable, and yet we continue our quest: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly in the past" (180). Nick—perhaps here something of a F. Scott Fitzgerald surrogate—recognizes the peculiar American innocence of this dream, the sense of "a fresh green breast of the new

### *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

world” with infinite possibility, but sees that like all human possibility, it is something to be tainted by disappointment, incompleteness, and the shadow of mortality.

As readers we reach with *Gatsby* for a new world only to realize it must be, like our lives, caught in the sweep of the human history and even more in the earth’s history, “a transitory enchanted moment.” For reading paradoxically enacts our mortality—books cease, narratives end, stories conclude—and we return to the tick tock of time, inevitably counting our life. But losing ourselves in the words and images of those dead and soon to be dead also affirms the immortality of the art and the human spirit. Thus William Shakespeare, Pablo Picasso, and Fitzgerald live and breathe in their creations, and for a moment we share their immortality.

### **Reading in Historical and Cultural Contexts**

Cultural criticism has come to mean many things but it should include an awareness of similarities that go beyond the borderlines between art forms and between national literatures. Thus it is important to recognize that at the same time that Conrad, Joyce and Woolf were making experiments in writing fiction, Picasso and Georges Braque were embarking, in cubism, on similar experiments as a painter. Writers and painter were scrambling the distinction between foreground and background, looking for new modes of representation, and including multiple perspectives on the same subject.

In a sense, color in painting provides the kind of energy and differentiation that Conrad’s adjectives provide in his fiction. Thus a chapter of my *Rereading Conrad* entitled “The Influence of Gauguin on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” suggests how Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian experience shaped Conrad’s writing. I have suggested elsewhere that Gauguin, Picasso, and Henri Matisse, among others, were exploring man’s primitive and atavistic antecedents during the approximate decade that Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), his other Malay novels (including *The Rescue*, which he did not publish until 1919), *Nostromo* (1904), and *The Secret Sharer* (1911).

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Do we not need more discussion (and perhaps university courses) that juxtapose paintings such as Matisse's 1910 *Dance II* and its sequel *Music*—with their vermilion figures, blue sky, and green hill—not merely to major texts of British literature but to roughly contemporary texts of other literatures, such as Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912)? And, of course, we need discussions (and courses) that are attentive to parallel developments in music and dance and other art forms, but let me pursue the Matisse analogy for a moment.

Like figures in *Lord Jim*, Matisse's figures are poised between a realistic and an aesthetic world. *Dance II* enacts the primitive fantasy that informs Conrad's Congo and Patusan, including the female figures of the savage mistress and Jewel. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow speaks about how he was tempted to go ashore for "a howl and a dance" with the savages. Matisse and Picasso—whose *Three Musicians* (1921) and *Three Dancers* (1925) are his comments on Matisse's *Dance II* and *Music*—would have endorsed Marlow's words in *Heart of Darkness*: "The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as the future." Modernism often includes a perspective and its own opposite or at least counterpart. Just as Matisse's reflective *Music* and libidinous and fantastic *Dance II* inform one another, so, too, in *Lord Jim* do Conrad's realist perspective of the Patna collision (and Jim's subsequent trial after the officers desert the ship) and Conrad's romance perspective of Patusan inform one another, and so in *Heart of Darkness* do Conrad's rendering of Kurtz's reversion to savagery and his rendering of Marlow's often reflective (and, later, retrospective) psychological responses.

### **Stages in Our Odyssey of Reading**

Some years ago I proposed a model of what happens when we read and I have tweaked it over the years. Even while acknowledging that my model is suggestive rather than rigorous, I believe that we do perceive in stages that move from a naive response or surface interpretation to critical or in-depth interpretation and, finally, to understanding our readings conceptually and ethically in terms of other knowledge.

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Awareness of such stages enables us to understand our original odyssey of reading as well as an odyssey of understanding that begins during our actual reading and is continually modified by the subsequent linear (and chronological) process of reading the next words, pages, chapters, and books, and continues after reading. My stages are:

1. *Immersion in the process of reading and the discovery of imagined worlds.* Reading is a place where text and reader meet in a transaction. As we open a text, we and the author meet as if together we were going to draw a map on an uncharted space. We partially suspend our sense of our world as we enter into the imagined world; we respond in experiential terms to the episodes, the story, the physical setting, the individualized characters as humans, and the telling voice. While it has become fashionable to speak dismissively of such reading as “naive,” or the result of the “mimetic illusion,” in fact how many of us do not read in that way with pleasure and delight—and with ethical judgments?

2. *Quest for understanding.* Our quest for understanding is closely related to the diachronic, linear, temporal activity of reading. The quest speaks to the gap between “What did you say?” and “What did you mean?” In writing, as opposed to speech, the speaker cannot correct, intrude, or qualify; he cannot use gestures or adjust the delivery of his discourse. Because in writing we lack the speaker’s help, we must make our own adjustments in our reading. As Paul Ricoeur notes, “What the text says now matters more than what the author meant to say, and every exegesis unfolds its procedures within the circumference of a meaning that has broken its moorings to the psychology of its author” (Ricoeur 1984, 191). In difficult and complex modern and postmodern texts, our search for necessary information may be much more of a factor than in traditional texts. In this stage, as we are actively unraveling the complexities of plot, we also seek to discover the principles or world view by which the author expects us to understand characters’ behavior in terms of motives and values. Moreover, we make ethical judgments about intersubjective (read: personal) relations and authorial choices.

3. *Self-conscious reflection.* Reflection speaks to the gap between “What did you mean?” and “What does that mean?” Upon reflection,

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

we may adjust our perspective or see new ones. What the interpretive reader does—particularly with spare, allusive (as well as elusive and illusive) modern literature—is to fill the gaps left by the text to create an explanatory text or Midrash on the text itself. As Wolfgang Iser puts it, “What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning” (quoted in Suleiman and Crossman 1980, 111). While the reader half-perceives, half-creates his original “immersed” reading of the text, he retrospectively—from the vantage point of knowing the whole—imposes shape and form on his story of reading. He discovers its significance in relation to his other experiences, including other reading experiences, and in terms of the interpretive communities to which he belongs. He reasons posteriorly from effects to causes. He is aware of referentiality to the anterior world—how that world informs the author’s mimesis—and to the world in which he lives. He begins—more in modern texts, but even in traditional texts—to separate his own version of what is really meant from what is said, and to place ethical issues in the context of larger value issues.

Here Tzvetan Todorov’s distinction between signification and symbolization is useful in defining how the reader moves from the imagined ontology to reflection: “Signified facts are understood: all we need is knowledge of the language in which the text is written. Symbolization facts are interpreted: and interpretations vary from one subject to another” (quoted in Suleiman and Crossman 1980, 73). A problem is that, in practice, what is understood or judged by one reader as signified facts may require interpretation or a different ethical judgment by another.

4. *Critical analysis.* As Paul Ricoeur writes, “To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says to what it talks about” (1984, 214). In the process, we always move from signifier to signified; for no sooner do we understand what the original signifiers signify within the imagined world than these signifieds in turn become signifiers for larger issues and symbolic constructions in the world beyond the text. Each of us responds in terms of the values enacted by the text and, as with my example from Eliot’s “Gerontion”—or, Pound’s anti-Semitism—resist where texts disturb our sense of fairness.

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

While the reader responds to texts in such multiple ways and for such diverse reasons that we cannot speak of a correct reading, we can speak of a dialogue among plausible readings. Drawing upon our interpretive strategies, we reflect on generic, intertextual, linguistic, and biographical relationships that disrupt linear reading; we move back and forth from the whole to the part. As Ricoeur writes: “The reconstruction of the text as a whole is implied in the recognition of the parts. And reciprocally, it is in constructing the details that we construe the whole” (1984, 204). My responses to my reading are a function of what I know, what I have recently been reading, my last experience of reading a particular author, my knowledge of the period in which the author wrote as well as the influences upon him or his influence on others, and my current values. My responses also depend both on how willing I am to suspend my sense of irony and detachment and enter into the imagined world of the text and on how much of the text my memory retains.

5. *Cognition in terms of what we know.* In a continuation of our fourth stage, we return to the original reading experience of the text and subsequently modify our conceptual hypotheses about the genre, period, author, canon, themes, and most of all, values. We also integrate what we have read into our reading of other texts and into our way of looking at ourselves and the world. Here we consciously use our values and our categorizing sensibility—our rage for order—to make sense of our reading experience and our way of being in our world. In the final stage, the interpretive reader may become a critic who writes his own text about the “transaction” between himself and the text—and this response has an ethical component.

### **Interpretive Communities**

Just as an author “rents” multiple linguistic systems to create what Mikhail Bakhtin calls heteroglossia, the reader “rents” diverse interpretive strategies—or perspectives—depending upon his prior experience. But we each belong to multiple interpretive communities; and

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

as we read, we draw upon our participation and experience in several interpretive communities. Not only do those interpretive communities change as well as modify and subvert one another, but also our relationship to them varies from text to text. How we read the texts—and the world—depends on an ever-changing hierarchy of interpretive strategies. These hierarchies constitute our reading of texts—and the world—even as they are constituted by it. That is, as we read, our interpretive strategies are challenged and modified even as they modify what we read. When reading criticism we need to be aware of the theoretical and methodological assumptions that produce a reading and examine whether we belong to the community of readers who share those assumptions.

We need to account for the subjectivity inherent in our reading. For may not subjectivity idiosyncratically deflect us from the decision about which interpretive communities we shall use? We also need be self-conscious about the distinctiveness of our position as to the text that we are describing or responding to. If someone were to read my interpretive criticism or come to my classes, he would be aware of my propensity for seeing texts in historical, mimetic, and formal terms—especially my propensity as a pragmatic Aristotelian to hear the voice of narrators and to stress the relationship between Doesness and Isness. And what about my personal background and experience? My biases and shortcomings? Do I not have a greater professional and personal stake in some texts than in others?

What I am suggesting is that the reader as *übermensch* or as super-reader is a disguise for the human reader with all his tics and quirks. Thus, if we wish to enter into a dialogue with other approaches, we need to understand the deflection caused by our subjectivity and that of the interpretive critics we read. It may be worth the effort to induce from each interpretive text a persona of the critic to see if we can explain his subjectivity and thus understand his underlying perspective, approach, values, methods, and theory. That is, we must read critical texts as if they too were spoken by a human voice to a human audience, and—as if we were hearing a first-person narration—we must attend to what is missing or distorted.

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Finally, the largest number of members in any interpretive community of readers is one. All criticism is disguised autobiography. We take our own journeys of reading and that are not quite the same as the journeys of others; nor are they same when we reread.

### **Launching an Odyssey of Reading: Notes on an Embarkation**

Originally educated as a formalist, reasonably early in my career I began to live by the mantra, “Always the text; always historicize.” What follows is the way such an odyssey of reading might be launched with reference to Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907). I am struck by the way that so many of Conrad’s novels take us from the opening sentence into a unique imagined world. Upon rereading, we see how the opening paragraphs establish a grammar of psychological, political, and moral cause and effect. For example, let us turn to *The Secret Agent* (1907):

Mr. Verloc, going out in the morning, left his shop nominally in charge of his brother-in-law. It could be done, because there was very little business at any time, and practically none at all before evening. Mr. Verloc cared but little about his ostensible business. And, moreover, his wife was in charge of his brother-in-law.

The disjunction between behavior and motive which is at the center of private and political life in Conrad’s turn-of-the-century London is foreshadowed in this opening paragraph. Verloc’s real business is spying, although the soft porn he peddles in his shop serves as a cover for his illicit relationship with Vladimir and the British Police. Pretending to be an anarchist, he is actually in the pay of the embassy of an unnamed authoritative country. We learn that everyone is in charge, or thinks he is, of others but those in the charge of those in charge often have their own secret plans. “Ostensible” business is a disguise for a more complex group of motives. Written large in the above passages are essential Conradian themes: 1) the discrepancy

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

between, on the one hand, dimly acknowledged needs, obsessions, and compulsions and, on the other, actual behavior; 2) the distinction between actual behavior and articulated motive—that is, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.

I want to show how this embarkation looks from the perspective of the completed journey. Conrad's conservative desire for a few simple moral and political ideas are at odds with his often-remarked skepticism. Yet he is not a cynic or a nihilist; he believes that within a morally neutral universe, humans can create islands of tentative meaning, even if from an objective perspective those islands are illusions. *The Secret Agent's* meaning depends on a self-dramatizing narrator willfully separating himself from a world he despises, only to gradually emerge in his telling as a character with his own humanistic values. Choreographing cynicism, Conrad creates a narrator whose cold, detached style aggressively reduces the characters to formal elements; the narrator is always evaluating, controlling, and restraining the nihilism of the world he describes with such disdain.

That an important the pleasure of reading derives from our understanding a text's unity and how the parts relate to the whole is particularly true for Conrad's texts. The consonance between Conrad's beginnings and endings are remarkable and one of the reason his works are so satisfying. Every aspect functions in terms of an aesthetic whole. As *The Secret Agent* concludes with the psychotic figure known as the Professor, we think not only of Stevie Verloc's last fatal walk in Greenwich but also of his walk to the Embassy of an unnamed totalitarian regime where he is intimidated—indeed terrorized—by Vladimir, the regime's political operative in England, into planning the bombing, which will arouse a desire for repression:

And the incorruptible Professor walked, too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked, frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

Does not the psychotic, narcissistic professor—a human perambulatory explosive device—make us aware of the ironic disjunction between those espousing radical politics and the human life they supposedly wish to improve? Does not his cynicism recall that of the debonair Vladimir who also revels in images of mindless violence even while being treasured as a social pet by British high society? The Professor emphasizes the nocturnal and self-serving activities of society's protectors, Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner, who themselves mysteriously walk about London driven by their own private motives. Their behavior recalls the tolerance of Nazi sympathizers by the British in the 1930s, which Kazuo Ishiguro has highlighted in his *The Remains of the Day*, a novel with Conradian resonance.

Fueled by New Historicism, current odysseys of reading put great stress on historical context, sometimes to the detriment of close reading. In keeping with the renewed emphasis on historical context, much has been made of the source material for Conrad's anarchists in *The Secret Agent*. The novel's central anarchic incident is based upon the Greenwich Bomb Outrage of 1894 when a man named Martial Bourdin had, like Stevie Verloc, killed himself setting off a bomb in Greenwich Park near the Royal Observatory. Bourdin's brother-in-law, H.B. Samuels, like Verloc, was a police agent. But whether detailed knowledge of source material is essential to understanding how Conrad imaginatively transmuted factual material is moot. Rather, Conrad's characterizations in *The Secret Agent* depend on his discovering apt tropes for recognizable political types of the right and left, types which barely need contextual explanation. Put another way, "Always historicize" means examining how historical contexts inform and enrich a text rather than following endless tangents that take readers into byways and tributaries.

When we read of the terrorists in *The Secret Agent*, we recognize in them today's psychotic racists, violent anti-abortionists, plane hijackers, and political terrorists seeking to destroy regimes they dislike, as well as the right-wing fanatics who bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City. Listen to Yundt, one of the anarchists in *The Secret Agent*: "No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and ill in the service of humanity—that's what

## *The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

I would have liked to see” (*The Secret Agent*, 47). The professor dreams of delivering a violent “startling” “blow fit to open the first crack in the imposing edifice of legal conceptions sheltering the atrocious injustice of society” (*The Secret Agent*, 76).

### **Returning Home: An Example of Disembarkation**

If each beginning is a genesis, each ending is an apocalypse reordering what has preceded. But let us use our metaphor of the odyssey and think about the close of a particular striking odyssey of reading in another frequently taught text.

Gabriel’s transformation at the end of Joyce’s *The Dead* is for him a personal one—one that does not free the rest of the Dublin residents from moral and spiritual paralysis but is a moment of hope rendered as a performance in which the reader participates (59):

Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world; the solid world itself that these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right; snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the

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*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

What is performed is the suspension of rational and linear thought. While, as we know from John Huston's wonderful film *The Dead*, the passage can be visualized, does it not enact a state of being that finally transcends the visual, a state when the soul, as W.B. Yeats puts it in "Sailing to Byzantium," "clap[s] its hands and sing[s]." For loving Gretta, for understanding that passion is itself a value, Gabriel is rewarded with serenity, an escape from his concerns, and an understanding that passion is a value: "Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age." We may recall that in *Ulysses* the vision of Rudy is Bloom's reward for taking care of Stephen in Dublin's night town.

Discursively, the last sentence makes little sense. One cannot hear snow falling through the universe and the antecedent of "their" is indeterminate (snowflakes? all the dead? Gretta and Michael? Gretta, Michael, and himself? all the past and future dead?). Gabriel's move outside the enclosure of his ego is enabled/performed by the phonics and reversals of the passage, particularly the last sentence. The passage's meaning derives from its place in a process; it contrasts with the mimesis of the preceding pages of the story and with Gabriel's paralytic self-consciousness, rationality, and literalism.

The ending is discourse not story; yet as discourse it shows us what Gabriel needs but lacks: song, lyricism, metaphoricity, escape from time into non-rational, passionate states of being, a loosening of the bonds of self-consciousness. The dissolution of Gabriel's ego is for him a positive move because he can surrender to the lyrical moment, to a time when the soul claps hands and sings. In a sense, at this moment he joins the dance of life, or thinks he does. It is a moment of rare serenity—visual, tonal, emotional serenity—a moment which resists (perhaps resents?) the critic's rational efforts to order it because it is allegorical and asyntactical. Even while acknowledging the brilliance of John Huston's visualization, do we not feel that it encroaches on our interior experience, on our private admiration of the scene and

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

reduces our rich, poly-auditory response to Gabriel's interior life and Joyce's rendering of it to a sequence of visual images? Isn't that often the problem when we see our intimate reading experience transformed into a film?

What is absent is as important as what is present in responding to character. The snow imagery focuses our attention on a world outside Gabriel—a natural world where generations live and die, thus rendering an individual's sense of self-importance irrelevant. We recall that snow has the potential to become ice (death) and water (life). Obviously, as ice it also suggests the emotional sterility of a world reduced to social gestures, empty talk, and loveless relationships—a world where a tiny pathetic "I" cannot connect to others to form a loving, passionate, tender couple; a world that does not even give Gabriel the feeling he so desperately needs—namely that of being part of a social mosaic. We can never be sure whether Gretta is waiting for Gabriel in the way that Molly is waiting for Bloom, because we see less of Gabriel's dignity and integrity than we see of Bloom's and more of Gabriel's selfishness and narrow-mindedness. Perhaps we do not quite sympathize with Gabriel's sense of isolation and disappointment as we do with Bloom's because of the latter's generous concern for others—such as Paddy Dignam's family and Mrs. Purefoy.

Note now fiction's realistic code reasserts itself when basic emotions of love and death are the subject. We respond powerfully to descriptions of Gabriel's transformation and use psychological grammar to understand that transformation, including his realization that conscience and self-consciousness are not the full parameters of living, that the love shared by Michael and Gretta contained passion, intensity, and intimacy that go beyond concern with whether or not Gretta wears galoshes. We might therefore speak of the precedence of subjects and note how our aesthetic sense itself is more likely to be pushed aside and relegated to the back burner when we are engaged by issues that matter to our human feelings—notably, issues of the human psyche. And we might say that most of us will be engaged mainly by the representation of emotions that interest us. Indeed, in speaking of the precedence and hierarchy of subjects that engage us, should we not acknowledge that a culture's ever-changing preferences, together

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

with its continuing interest in certain themes and problems such as adult sexual love, help create and recreate its literary canon?

**Conclusion: Professing Reading within  
the University and Beyond**

As humanists, we need to look beyond the academy and take part in larger discussions about what we read and how and why we read. We need to be stakeholders in public discussion of the role of the humanities and to argue for the role of imaginative literature in opening the doors and windows of our minds. We need to articulate why the study of literature matters. We need to clearly and precisely explain why we do what we do and why it matters, and be willing to engage audiences beyond those specialists who do what we do. We need to develop rhetoric of engagement and to acknowledge that the discussion of values—how they are shaped by history and how by individual obsessions, compulsions and dimly acknowledged needs—is not only literature's subject but also the reason many of us read. We need articulate the joy we experience in seeing how Thackeray and Conrad and Joyce and Woolf and George Eliot bend language to meet their artistic goals and we need explain how their stylistic experimentations are necessary and sufficient for their meaning. When we as literature professors do our research on literary texts, we need not be overly modest about making claims for the production of knowledge even while understanding that there are other critical constructs with other definitions of knowledge.

Even while rejoicing in Joyce and the other wonderful texts I have been discussing, I want to discuss, too, an issue that should concern us academics, namely the danger of insularity—the danger that we burrow deeply into our areas of interest without communicating to the body of readers who want us to present our insights and discoveries not in academic jargon but in language that they understand. We need to tell our stories of reading in ways that appeal to a wider audience and share with them the passion we feel for our subject and the reasons we feel that passion and joy. We do an injustice to our study of

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*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

literature if we fail to build a bridge between our scholarship and the larger audience of non-academics who read with pleasure. When we write as teachers we need not simply write as if we were in the eighth week of a graduate seminar or a colloquium. Rather, we must as scholars and teachers articulate what we do not only for specialists but for students we are mentoring, undergraduates who come for the first time to the texts we love—whether it be Shakespeare, Woolf or Toni Morrison—for the first time, and readers in the world beyond the academy who turn to us for our ability to open the doors and windows of complex texts. We need to remember, too, that our students live in the world beyond the classroom, and we need teach them to speak articulately, read perspicaciously, and think critically. What we do as teachers is not merely convey knowledge but grow young adults.

In the age of the Internet where reading often means taking in brief messages and communication depends on cell phones, text-messaging, and email, we need to make a case for reading books and reading difficult and time consuming books. In this vein, I would like to briefly return to a fundamental question “Why do we read?” I know it is hard to separate our roles as literary intellectuals and scholars making our careers from this fundamental question, but it is an urgent question. Don’t we read to complement our own experience of life? To learn how others make sense of human life? To journey elsewhere into different places and backwards (and sometimes forwards) in time? To see complex ethical dilemmas dramatized within a narrative structure and to watch imagined characters sort through them? In our reading we make judgments and evaluations, even while we learn to be sympathetic and empathetic.

Nor should we forget that we read for pleasure—the local delights of seeing how language can be shaped to do wonders and the larger delights of the wonders of life and the understanding of what humans live—and, on occasion—die for. We should not be embarrassed to see characters with imagined ontologies as representations of how humans live and, indeed, we can learn much from watching the results of Kurtz’s moral absolutism and pathological reversion to savagery, from the Captain’s commitment to his task in *The Secret Sharer*, and

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

from Leopold Bloom's resilience, curiosity, and reliance on his core values of decency and generosity.

We must, I repeat, never forget that books are by humans, about humans, and for humans. We need to pay attention to what is represented in texts and what we learn from the dramatizations of human behavior within texts, all the while realizing these representations and dramatizations are the result of skillful artistry and are metaphors for real people.

While I was thinking about a keynote address I was to give at a Joyce conference in 2005, my mother died little more than a year my father's death. Her final illness was quite awful and so was my father's the year before. Not surprisingly I was tempted to descend into my personal Hades as I thought about the ephemeral nature of life, my place now as the oldest survivor in my immediate family, and the horrors of growing old. I found some solace in the way Joyce's Bloom overcomes his own disappointments by affirming life: "Plenty to see and hear and feel yet. Feel live warm beings near you. Let them sleep in their maggoty beds. They are not going to get me this innings. Warm beds: warm fullblooded life."

I should like to close this chapter with the Constantine Cavafy poem entitled "Ithaka." Cavafy's poem speaks not only to life as an odyssey but also to the odyssey of reading. It suggests Ithaca as a metaphor for the completion of a text and of the correlation between our reading texts and our understanding—to cite Stevens in "The Idea of Order at Key West"—"of ourselves and of our origins."

**Ithaka**

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope your road is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery, Laistrygonians, Cyclops,  
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:  
you'll never find things like that on your way  
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,  
as long as a rare excitement

*The Odyssean Reader or the Odyssey of Reading*

stirs your spirit and your body.  
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,  
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them  
unless you bring them along inside your soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.  
Hope your road is a long one.  
May there be many summer mornings when  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time;  
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
to buy fine things,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
sensual perfume of every kind—  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
and may you visit many Egyptian cities  
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.  
Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.  
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey. Without her you wouldn't  
have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

Is not the goal of each of our odysseys of reading to have a “marvelous journey [...] so full of experiences?”