

**READING LIFE: Books for the Ages**

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“Love’s Wound, Love’s Salve: Knut Hamsun’s *Pan*”: *American Scholar and Re-Readings*, edited by Anne Fadiman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

“Romancing the Self: Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*”: *American Scholar*

“‘Live All You Can’: Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*”: *The Threepenny Review*

“The Mad Energies of Art: Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift*”: *The Virginia Quarterly Review*

“The Possibility of the Search: Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*”: *The Believer*

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## The Reading Life

When I was younger, before books had sorted themselves into different kinds of experiences, I read a great deal. I read in all directions—for story, or because I was curious about a reputation, or hungered for some mood or atmosphere, or just because I had time on my hands and wanted to see where a particular path of words might take me. I miss those days, the excitement of wandering, that sense of the book as an unknown entity that could hold just about anything between its covers. For one of the sad consequences of reading many books for many years is that the map eventually starts to come clear, with fewer and fewer uncharted areas. And then with the passing of enough time the other thing disappears too, the languid leisure that is the spawning ground of the inner life. I don't ever now have time on my hands as I once did. The Protestant ethic has finally bent me to its will. Now when I do have any idleness it afflicts my conscience. What happened to simple being?

For any devoted reader the act is deeply, complexly bound up with inwardness—with consciousness, sensibility, with whatever noun we choose to designate the murmur of awareness that accompanies us—and carries us—from first waking to sleep again. The words we read—the impressions, the narratives, the conversations and thoughts of characters—not only touch our private sense of ourselves, but merge with it, shaping and directing it. After all, we use our own imaginative energy to bring the words to life and then project their content—their stuff—onto the interior screen. There the world we've generated from the written signals glows vividly, or flickers faintly, or moves in and out of resolution, depending on who we are, what we are reading, and the wattage of our moods.

WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES certain people become readers and others not? It's an ongoing mystery. Many people grow up in bookish environments and don't pick up the print addiction, while some of the fiercest book partisans had little or no early exposure whatsoever. It's hard to know what started them on their course. I opt for

psychology over socialization: some people discover a deep gratification in the print transaction, others don't; certain temperaments are predisposed, most aren't. As for what determines the predisposition, I won't presume to generalize—it's hard enough for me to work down to the root of my own experience.

I believe that I came to reading out of a sense of solitary self-consciousness. This is the line connecting what I recall of my earliest childhood book-immersions with my life in the present. I don't mean that books were an answer to loneliness, not first and foremost, nor that they were a conventional ticket to imaginary other places (though I was hardly immune to the pleasures of transport). In fact, there are ways in which reading intensifies life in the here and now even as it takes us away. When I read, as I did obsessively, certain mysteries, like those in the Hardy Boys series, it was not just to lose myself inside the world of Frank and Joe Hardy. I was also taking the adrenaline of suspense and working it into my own life, borrowing from it, looking at my world through the frame of mystery. We've all done the filmmaker pantomime, forming a box with forefinger and thumb of both hands, peering at whatever is right in front of us as if we were getting ready to film. It's a simple vantage shift, a way of sharpening the sense of the thing by defamiliarizing it. I found early on that moving through my day under the compression of an author's imagination had a similar effect. It was a way of involving myself more deeply while working with a removed perspective, and it cut against the ache of solitariness.

MY BASIC FEELING of disconnectedness never disappeared, it just changed its aspect. When I was a teen I embraced the then-fashionable term "alienation." To be alienated was to be estranged, living askew. It was an intensified—and voluntarily accepted—version of what I had always felt. Living was dissonance; I registered a clear lack of harmony between inner and outer, between what I was thinking and feeling and what was required by the situation around me—by family, teachers and friends.

Solitary self-consciousness, the experience of distance, the stress of being angled to the world, as well as the cottony solace of alienation—all of these are part of the predisposition that leads to reading. But there is also a craving for whatever is not supplied by our worldly interactions, an intuition of other alignments, other scales of mattering, other possible tempos, almost as if turning pages and processing language produce a chemical surge in the system, some steadying vibration missing before.

I don't have specific memories about how I originally came into reading, except for one, very isolated, which was the jubilant, viscerally felt moment when a previously impenetrable line of print—the first sentence of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*—opened to me like a hard knot suddenly yielding. I was in the first grade, but fifty years later I can still feel that sudden availability of meaning, and the realization that it was not just a phrase, a sentence, giving way before me, but a whole universe that until a moment before had been sealed off.

Otherwise, though, the transitions are murky, how I might have shifted from one level, one depth or capacity, to another. What's sure for me is that from that first cracking of the code I've never not been a reader; I've never moved too far away from that other reality made available by print. When I open a book, even now, I still have some expectation of changing my psychological vantage. But this is nothing like my earliest reading which, until I lost the power of that absorption, allowed what felt like an almost complete exchange of realities. What I feel these days is a strenuous give-

and-take between perspectives, a tension between the immediacy of the present and the brightly conjured *there* of the book. What's more, it's generally not the erasure I crave, not complete vicariousness, but that peculiar doubleness, that oscillation between outer and inner. Something about energy—attention—moving between two poles, turning up the inner and dimming down the outer, compensates the imbalance, my sense of the world being, as William Wordsworth wrote, “too much with us.”

Thrown too fully into the outer—the picnic, the parade, the dutiful social gathering—I panic. I find no place to put this self I tote around. When I settle in with a book, on the other hand, I feel the body and its behaviors recede. The cloudy “I” leaks out, expanding to fill whatever imagined space becomes available.



WHENEVER I GO BACK to memories of childhood reading I feel embarrassed in hindsight. The books I loved—and consumed—were not beyond literary reproach. I wasn't feasting early on excellence, and the part of me that regards reading with a judging eye, that thinks we can measure the quality of our inner life by what we do and don't respond to, wonders why not. I wasn't seeking out Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. I found my way not to Thomas Hardy but to the Hardy Boys—those books that turned out, years later, not to have been written by Franklin W. Dixon, but by a team of hacks. Where was my discernment, my instinct for nuanced narrative and credibly complex characters? Well, it must not have existed because this one obsession kept me captive for a good long time. When I was in its deepest throes I would ask my mother to leave me off at the local Little Professor bookstore when she went to do her shopping. I would stand, often for an hour or more, in front of the Hardy Boys section, that crazy-making yard or so of blue spines, holding whichever book I was reading close to my face, paging my way forward as quickly as I could—the classic nerd.

This was certainly reading—it was part of my long apprenticeship to the act—but what was the point of it? Escape and intensification, as I've suggested. I pulled this world of the Hardys around me 360 degrees, and I breathed its air. I worked up every scene in detail until I saw it, felt it, set it pulsing with my own speeded-up heartbeat, following the adventures until they streamed one into the next, my reading become a grand banquet of clues, dangers, and last-minute rescues. That this could be endlessly varied without the brothers or their friends ever getting older or losing their joking camaraderie, and without their father, the esteemed Fenton Hardy, ever faltering in his wise surveillance of their endeavors, was unbelievable delight.

Easy as it is to recover the first enchantment, I don't remember how I finally outgrew the whole business. There was fading, gradual distance, a lessening of investment, and finally one day there was something new to attract the attention. Oddly, once I'd left the Hardy brothers behind, I seldom gave them a thought. Decades sluiced by, and it was really only when my own son Liam got to mid-grade school that I zeroed in again. Suddenly I felt that I wanted to give it to him, the gift of those books, what I remembered as being a thrilling and sustainable imaginary world. By this point, Liam and I were in our last period of bedtime reading, there more for the sentimental ritual than anything else. He had already begun to enjoy reading for himself. But we still put in our time with Harry Potter. In fact, it was just when we had

finally finished one of the Potters and were looking around for the next thing that I thought to introduce the Hardys.

What a dull thud that was. Not just for Liam, who humored me for a week or so before announcing that he wasn't that interested, but for me, too. If reading aloud had an equivalent to chewing a cud, this was it. I couldn't believe the formulaic barrenness, the machine-made dialogue, the pat predictability of the characters and plot turns. This couldn't be right. "Wait," I said, "wait until Chet Morton comes in—he's a funny character." Well, Chet arrived, but he was as bad as the brothers. I could feel Liam's brave attention drifting. And then I closed the covers. As Dante wrote, apropos of Paolo and Francesca: "We read no more that day."



READING IN OUR YOUNGER YEARS is an evolutionary process, I think, closely tied to the expansion and deepening of awareness, practical knowledge, and social sophistication, and as experience sharpens us, allowing us to bring more and more to the encounter, so it helps influence how we absorb the events that come our way. During adolescence my reading had a good deal to do with the kinds of situations I encountered. If I hadn't read, say, *On the Road* or *The Tropic of Cancer* when I did, I might have made a number of different choices. And even if I *had* thrown myself into hitchhiking in every direction, or wandering Europe with a backpack, I would have brought to bear a different pressure of romantic imagining, and every situation would have unfolded otherwise.

The movements from phase to phase—in reading as in life—are often gradual, marked by little shifts in our attention patterns. When the juice, the savor, began to leak away from the old reliable Hardy scenario, it was replaced by what felt like an irresistible new excitement. This was the early 1960s. We had a handsome young president who was also witty and articulate, and who told an interviewer from the press that he enjoyed reading Ian Fleming's James Bond novels. Suddenly those books were everywhere, at newsstands, in revolving drugstore racks, and even though they were deemed too racy for young teens, everyone I knew was reading them. Access was not a problem. There they sat on the home coffee table. *The Spy Who Loved Me*, *Dr. No*, *Goldfinger*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* . . . It's hard now to give Bond back his pre-Connery aura, hard, indeed, to repossess the time-bound glamour of those crisp little paperbacks with their sketchily suggestive covers, which we only glanced at. Our interest was taken up mainly by the sexy bits (with Bond always getting right to the brink of something really good), the exhilarating sophistication of the trappings (the drinks, cars, clothes, gizmos), and the steady dose of international intrigue (signaled by exotic cities, secret bank-accounts) that had as much influence as the Huntley-Brinkley news hour on giving us the sense of the dangerous larger world.

But Ian Fleming was important to my reading story in another, more lasting way. Although he was not in any sense a legitimate author of the sort I would soon be studying in English classes—not even a John Steinbeck or a William Golding—it was while I was reading the Bond books that the spark first leapt the gap between the idea of *writer* and the idea of *book*. Of course I'd made the connection before—books came from writers as milk came from cows—but this time it happened in a fatefully romantic way. I finally "got" that being an author of books was not only an actual

vocation, but a highly attractive one. For this I credit my mother.

My mother read—by day, by night, whenever time allowed, and with palpable devotion. It was her books that filled the upstairs bookcases and gave me a quiet sense of bounty whenever I lingered there to inspect, reading dust-jacket descriptions, poring over author photos.

Ian Fleming was one of my mother's writer-heroes. Not because of his literary skills, which she conceded as nothing remarkable, but because, like Hemingway, he conformed to a basic type: he was handsome in the rugged, manly way she liked, romantically erratic, cosmopolitan, and lit-erarily productive. He married adventure—the outward life—to output; he was dashing. Best of all: he was the favorite of another of her idealized males, John F. Kennedy. I remember that she kept a copy of Fleming's travelogue *Thrilling Cities* on her night table for the longest time, and the book became a talisman for me. When no one was home, I would sit on the edge of my parents' bed and page through the descriptions of Singapore, Cairo, Rio . . .

Reading Fleming in tandem with my friends—those few who read— I was mainly focused on intrigue and sexual innuendo. But I was also slowly coming around to the conception that being a writer was in itself a heroic thing, laying the groundwork for a mythology that remains with me to this day. Writer as creator, writer as witness, writer as person living an engaged authentic life—not that I have ever measured up to my own high standard of authenticity.

It was another stage. As I'd done with the Hardy Boys, I went through my days screening everything through the mesh of my grandiose Fleming imaginings, giving situations and encounters the italics of fresh emphasis. The difference was that now I had also begun to see this angling of experience as an attribute of my eventual vocation—for in all of this it had become clear to me, though I don't remember exactly how, that I was destined to be a writer.

From the time of my early teen years, I spent as much time as I could in bookstores and libraries, not only because books offered stimulus to my writerly fantasies, but also because they reached me in some more abstract way. When I was near shelves of books, I came alive, almost as if I were picking up emanations. I felt a sense of perspective, of scale, the solace of the idea of generations, as well as a great desire to do things on my own, to achieve.

If tales of mystery and intrigue originally lured me into the other world of reading, and if Ian Fleming gave me my first intoxicating glimpse of author as protagonist, hero of the double life, then the melancholy brooding of later adolescence redirected me completely. In my early teens I had my first exposure to J. D. Salinger, to the character of Holden Caulfield. This was something I hadn't imagined possible, that I could open the pages of a dime-store paperback and merge, from the first sentence on, with a voice that seemed to be coming not from outside, but from my own restless core. Here was absorption—identification—of a very different kind. Now instead of projecting myself into the doings of an idealized protagonist, I was taken over, involved with a character not through action, through his deeds, but through his basic way of being, his attitude. Everything changed. Where before I would pilfer for myself the whole dramatic frame, the concept, using it to magnify and intensify my own daily doings—seeing situations as potentially fraught with danger, mystery, or unexpected romantic development—now I felt my overall attitude and outlook profoundly affected

by that of the character I was reading. I was, in a light and mostly benign sense of the word, possessed. Holden Caulfield was the first—his phrases, his slangy cadences, his poignant bemused wondering at things were like a viral infection: overnight large parts of my life became “depressing as hell” and half the people I dealt with were suddenly unmasked to me as “phonies.” Although I was hardly alone in this—a whole generation was undergoing a Salinger baptism—I imagined myself alone. I had to. Holden himself would have had nothing but scorn for the idea of a Holden craze.

After such exposure, such moving around of the inner furniture, I couldn’t go back to the *status quo ante* again. The voice, the feeling of connection—even if it was a connection to disaffection—had created an appetite. I began to cast around in my reading for other books that could give me that same moody pleasure. Action and adventure didn’t interest me anymore. James Bond couldn’t hope to compete with this skinny chain-smoking teenager with his red deerstalker hat.

Holden initiated the grail quest for the credible literary antihero. This figure, this filter of experience, had to accept my projections. He—a female character would not do—had to be thoughtful, sad, isolated from the herd of others around him; he had to know his existence as problematic, painful even, much as I did (surrounded as I was by phonies). So I read, and enjoyed, books like *PS. Wilkinson* by C. D. B. Bryan, *The Sterile Cuckoo* by John Nichols, *The Temple of Gold* by William Goldman, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, and others, the names and jacket images of which have begun to fade from memory.

I was, at fifteen and sixteen, I see this now, nibbling at the fringes of a more serious literary involvement, one that would lead me soon enough to the Eugene Gant novels of Thomas Wolfe, to Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Knut Hamsun, J. P. Donleavy, and then Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joyce Cary—anything, really, that had a whiff of the angst or rebellion I needed in order to keep working on my complicated self-definition.



AT SOME POINT the reading experience changes—the discovery curve flattens and it gets harder and harder to tap the old reliable pleasures. The reader gets jaded. At least this was my experience. By the time I entered my forties I’d been reading steadily for more than twenty-five years—on my own, as a student, as a teacher, as a reviewer. I had worked full-time in bookstores for nearly a decade, giving and getting recommendations, dipping my nose into thousands of books. My approach to reading novels changed accordingly. If I had less expectation about discovering the pure unknown, I also became far more receptive to the idea of re-reading. There were some good reasons for this. For one thing, I was less subject than before to the tyranny of the checklist—being able to say, to myself, to others, that I had read such and such a book. That powerful old incentive had begun to fade a bit. For another, I was now in most cases far enough from my original reading to have forgotten many things about that encounter. Indeed, I was often surprised, going back, to find the work had grown fresh again, full of unexpected turns and nuances.

Although I returned to many novels during this time, there is a small group that, for whatever complex reasons, acquired special status. These were works I thought of covetously, as private properties. I felt that I had a special connection to them. Not

only had I filled them with my most intense projections, but I also knew that they had more to tell me.

I ended up re-reading some of these special books a number of times, in part to recapture something of the pleasure they had given me, but also, I now realize, because I found that they served me as reference points. They were like so many buoys of the inner life, allowing me to mark changes and get a sense of distances traversed.

This involved a double measurement. The novels themselves, of course, reflected different psychological interests—the trajectory from *The Catcher in the Rye* to *The Ambassadors* is a long one—but my reactions over time to the same work also inscribed a pattern of growth and change. Reengaging these key books in my forties, I was a better, more astute reader, no question. But I was also *different*. On every level. I no longer responded to language, or character, or ideas as I had at twenty, or thirty. My sense of what was funny, or poignant was different, too. As was the frame, the context within which I now faced the work. When I read *Madame Bovary* for the first time, I was nineteen years old and staying in a bunkhouse in Montana. I had little understanding of European history, or French mores, or the traditions of the novel; I had no conception of the literal meaning or the aesthetic implications of the Flaubertian *mot juste*. I knew a bit about sexual passion but nothing at all of marriage, and so on.

Before taking up the question of re-reading, I should say more about the incentives and circumstances of many of those first exposures. I mean here my reading of the familiar “classics” and the checklist mentality that was so hard to shake off. I was, I should confirm, an early and unquestioning believer in the edifying power of books that had withstood the “test of time,” and question this as I have over the years, I have never lost the basic faith. Others had religion in the home, I had this: books enlarge and improve; they humanize. I accept this even as I am without proof, for I have never found a shred of bankable concrete evidence—not in my own character anyway. And what would such evidence amount to? It’s a peculiar business. If I undertake a regimen of exercise I see the good of it in a matter of days. But if someone challenges me to prove that a lifetime of reading has bettered me, I’m lost. Bettered how? I have a larger vocabulary than I might have otherwise, sure. And I can talk for hours about fictional situations and characters, using various refined terminologies. But has any of this has made me “better” than I might have been otherwise? In fact, I could easily imagine the opposite argument: all this immersion has undermined my practical readiness, I have distanced myself from my own primary emotions, all my work has fitted me for a career of reading and writing about books and not much else.

I try not to take this latter accusation too seriously. I don’t really accept the idea that the point of living is to contend with practical matters, or that direct emotion always has primacy over more refracted and complicated kinds of response. In my view a command of various perspectives and psychological vantages is an enormous asset in the social world. How can it not be? But I should also admit that I keep a residual trace of doubt, the original source of which is, no question, my father thundering at me that I should leave off my ineffectual—escapist—turning of pages and mow the lawn.

Slight hesitations notwithstanding, the idea of the importance of the classics

lodged in my susceptible superego early on, and there it remains. At first I took it on the authority of my elders—teachers and credible public spokesmen—as well as canonizing institutions like the Modern Library. Isn't this how many of us get our ideas of the "classic" and the canonical, absorbing them through sustained cultural cross-referencing? An English teacher, himself a product of this process, refers in class to the "great" Southern novelist William Faulkner, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (obviously prizes matter), whereupon soon after we meet with the same name cited as an influence in a headnote for some other writer we are to read. By the time Faulkner's novels turn up in a roster of "other Modern Library classics" or some such, the deed is done. We accept the greatness on faith, without having read the man; we are—possibly—ready to blame ourselves and not our sources if we find the work uninteresting or incomprehensible.

Maybe because of my mother, or because of the general family climate—veneration of the greatness of artists and thinkers was a given—I became fixated on lists of "great books" early on. I conceived them as so many ladders I had to climb and imagined that successful ascent would remake me. Into what? Some blue-blazered Alistair Cooke figure, a hot-triggered pundit like William Buckley? I don't think I had many models in my early years of apprenticeship, except for a few of the brainy seniors I admired when I enrolled as a new fifth-former at the prep school down the road. But who can judge the true power of such influence? A knowing classroom reference to Herodotus by a blazer-wearing prefect (we had prefects, blazers!) could be ignition enough under the right circumstances. And a few of these exemplars did exist. As did various underemployed "masters" (teachers) who had their sights set on bigger things than teaching, and took out their intellectual frustrations on us, bullying us and mocking our inadequacy.

Whatever the causes, and however it all worked, from my teenage years on I was haunted by the enormity of what I didn't know, and I had a strong determination to make inroads. It was a short-lived, but intense, pleasure to strike a line through another title on one of those lists. *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham—check. *Sons and Lovers*—check. Nor has the compulsion died out completely. I'd be lying if I pretended I felt no private back-slap of accomplishment when, fairly recently, I made it all the way to the end of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. And I admit that I do from time to time still linger over some census of importance, muttering in my thoughts, Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*—check.

For all this, I always refused to read slavishly, or follow any approved sequence. It mattered to me that I be engaged by a book, interested, that I'd wanted to read it. My whole literary education has been a process of trying to become the person who would *want* to read Classic X. If I felt no pull toward the work of Haldor Laxness, say, then it was because I wasn't yet cultured enough to be curious about rural Icelandic life. Samuel Butler, Sir Thomas Browne? My historical horizons were still too narrow, my reach of reference impoverished. To study a list was to shuttle incessantly between self-congratulation and self-reproach—it was a way of rating myself against the measuring wall of my own ideals.



SOMEHOW THROUGH ALL OF THIS, BECAUSE OF IT, IN SPITE OF IT, ALL KINDS OF BOOKS GOT

READ, APPROVED “CLASSICS” AMONG THEM, AND WHEN ENOUGH YEARS HAD PASSED I DID BEGIN TO GET THAT SENSE OF THE FIELD NARROWING. I WAS GOING FOR LONGER AND LONGER INTERVALS WITHOUT CONNECTING TO A NOVEL THAT stirred me up or repositioned the world for me. At the same time, for reasons I’ve given, books that had once worked their spell on me started to look appealing again.

With return came the first great surprise of re-reading, the recognition that there is no stepping twice into the same print river. This is something more profound than the traveler remarking that the houses seem smaller, the trees differently placed, though on occasion this is what it feels like, too. More often, though, and especially with the more ambitious books, came the head-shaking recognition that everything was changed, that I could not have been present in this world before, at least not fully aware. And with this I would sometimes get a metaphysical intuition: I had moved somehow closer to understanding the mystery of literature. Literature is not, as represented by institutions, as regarded by criticism—indeed, as symbolized by the solid bound object—a fixed unchanging entity. The work is no more a static thing than the reader is a reliably constant presence. If anything, the reverse is true. While the words may be locked into place, held fast, their valences are untethered, and it is only the reader’s responsiveness,\* playing over them like a wind, that determines in what ways and to what degree a work will *mean*. What a thought! It is so against our systems, our habits and assumptions, that we find it hard to grasp. Reading, the mind’s traffic in signs and signifiers, is the most dynamic, changeful, and possibly transformational act we can imagine. To have read a work and have been strongly affected by it—and to then come back to it after many years—can be a foundation-shaking event.

But this truth is not easy to catch hold of, much less assess and evaluate. There is no way to escape the workings of indeterminacy. The experimenter is, as Heisenberg long ago observed, part of the experiment, a factor in its result. So with re-reading—we have no neutral place from which to consider our findings. We may have responded one way when we read a novel twenty years ago, but unless we wrote down the particulars of that response, we have only our memories to go by—memories both elastic and unreliable. I may remember that I loved the mood of the opening passage of a Thomas Hardy novel, I may even remember, or think I remember, specific details. On return I discover that the section is really only a few paragraphs long, and that the best details have been edited out—not a trace of that winding path I pictured so vividly. You can see where the problem lies—not with the difference between first and second responses, but with memory itself, with the fact that much of that first response has vanished into an imprecise, partly invented, retelling. What my re-reading brings me up against is not necessarily a changed perception of the work, but a recognition of the falsifying—the transformational—power of memory.

If my memory is not especially instructive about my first experience of *The Return of the Native*, it does tell me a great deal about my imagination and my projections. Nor are we dealing with some single instance. The complete re-reading of that, or any other, novel lays down layer after layer of these corrections, or self-revisions, and in their accumulation they become a fuzzy, often inscrutable interior self-portrait. Most often, I look up from this strange exposure augmented. I feel that I have grown, become more discerning, smarter, capable of finer psychological insight. If I respond

with what I imagine is equal enthusiasm, I feel vindicated. If my response is diminished, less enthusiastic, I chalk it up to maturity, though I may—as happened with Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* after several decades—also wonder if I have not traded away a certain susceptibility.

RE-READING—THE GOING BACK, the reiteration—is what gets us deeper into what reading is because it forces us to let go of the idea of text as static, or stable, in its meanings, and of ourselves as simple translators of written signs into contents. Re-reading immerses us in the dynamic of change and indeterminacy, and in the process more closely merges our reading and the inner life, for in going back to a book we can’t help reconnecting with our prior subjectivities. Focused though we may be, we are not seeing just the text in front of our eyes. No matter how thoroughly the passing of time may have erased the traces of the earlier encounter, some expectations remain. And these become, inevitably, the screen through which we take in the narration. We re-read the way we walk a once-known path, playing off what we see in front of us against what we expect: a turn, a hill, a brambly patch.



BUT ALL THIS REFLECTION on re-reading also forces a closer, more exacting look at the novel itself, at the particular pleasure and discipline of novel-reading, which is different from other kinds of reading, certainly the informational kind—histories, biographies, and topical books. What is the “genius” or spirit of the form that makes it so unlike all other creative expressions? I’ve been pushed to wonder about this lately. There is a new piece of received wisdom in our culture: the factual, the nonfictional, has carried the day; events in the real world are more compelling and attention-worthy than anything we can invent. Some of our leading journals, former literary strongholds like the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, and the *Paris Review*, have moved to scale back fiction in order to make room for more documentary reportage. Here it is the short story taking the hit, but the literary novel is faring just as badly in the precincts of publishing. Indeed, to call something “literary” in these circles is to call it unsalable. Marketing, however, is not the problem. What is finally at issue is nothing less than the status, the perceived value, of imagination itself.

There is a widespread misapprehension about the nature and purpose of fiction, the novel in particular. A great many people still take storytelling to be the core mission of the novel, storytelling and the depiction of the features of our common world. If this were actually true, who would contest that the genre has been superceded? As Philip Roth observed decades ago, in our era of the extraordinary unthinkable real, the narration of what actually takes place, done with documentary precision, readily trumps what the novelist might cook up. What’s more, nonfiction has the cachet of having actually happened. Likewise, the psychological possibilities available to the biographer, memoirist, and even the historian, are every bit as compelling as what the novelist conjures—and again, they are real. Obviously, so long as point-for-point comparisons of this kind are made, the score falls lopsidedly to the team of the actual.

But setting the invented and the “real” side by side in this way completely misses the point. It takes verisimilitude as a criterion of value and assumes that the reading of fiction and documentary nonfiction call on the same mental and psychological processes. Nothing could be less true.

The novel does not represent the world so much as it *creates* one that may or may not recall the one we know. Its value lies not in its fidelity to the known, but in its power to compel belief in a reality that differs from the known, the reality of “as if.” The arena of fiction is, and always has been, the conjectural. Reading, we release our suppressed dreaming selves in ways that we cannot when we are constrained by the claim of the actual. The prototype of fiction, of “make believe,” is the “Once upon a time” of the early romance, of the bedtime story. The documentary work would likely specify, “On the third of April, in 1986 . . . The former opens us to wondering; the latter offers certainty, the reassurance of groundedness. Although I deliberately choose these polarized expressions, the simple truth is that fiction and nonfiction call upon, and appeal to, separate parts of the reader’s sensibility.

It doesn’t matter that the world outdoes the storyteller’s imagination in terms of the characters and situations it throws up. What matters is that we read even the wildest nonfictional account in a different way than we read a work of fiction. Although the points of divergence may be hard to specify, they are vital. Consider the analogy to photography and representational painting. The photograph of a tree, say, and a carefully executed painting of the same. How are they distinguished—on the wall, and in our looking? The photo carries the authority of the actual: *this* is how the tree really looks. The painting, superficially anyway, is evaluated according to how close it comes to the same “actual.” But only superficially. Where the photo is understood to be a composed transfer of the real, an artistically executed visual excerpt, the painting, however accurate in its delineation, is not a transfer but a translation. The subject matter has passed through the medium of the painter’s interior awareness—it has been seen, absorbed, and reconstituted. There is a difference for the viewer. However beautiful the photo, however much its subject matter encourages private associations—our readily induced reveries of the pastoral—those projections run alongside, parallel to, the image. They do as much as would any dreamy thoughts we had looking at a real tree in a real field. With the painting, however, our subjective responses are directly circuited through the work. We are not responding to the seen “fact” of the tree, but to the rendering of the tree, which is already flush with the artist’s own subjectivity. We are, in looking and reacting, in a communion of sorts with the vision—the interiority—of the artist.

The subjectivity of the photographer is present as well, but we look past it, much as we look past the artistic sensibility of the nonfiction writer, immersing ourselves instead in the *what* of the subject matter.

This, for me, is also the deep-rooted appeal of the novel, the world created with reference to the real, but at the same time apart from it. Reading an imagined work, I am released from contingent into conditional space. I move into the totality of the writer’s inwardness as into a unique gravitational field. Every element of the book matters, not just the plot and the characters and the thematic development, but also the descriptions, digressions, sentence rhythms, everything. All the literary elements combine to create the distinctive “other” reality of the novel, and reading is not just following the narrative, but submitting to the full reach of that reality.

This self-contained density helps explain to me why I can’t just take up one new novel after the next, even when the reading urge is on me. It also may account for why so many people like to stay with the familiar, reading in the vicinity of a favorite

author. Because entering a new force field is taxing, requires a certain giving over of the self, not only in the sense of suspending disbelief on behalf of the narrative premise, but in terms of acclimatizing the self to a new atmosphere. The transfer has to “take.” We all know the difference between reading with and against the grain, following the sympathies versus exerting the will.

To understand the novel in this way is also to begin to appreciate how specific books can affect us as they do, reaching us in the moment, but also exerting subtle ongoing effect. For when we submit to an author’s terms, her vision, we take it in as experience. Because we absorb the actual detailed features of another’s subjectivity, the work touches us at our most receptive, least barricaded, and we respond much as we do when we are affected by another individual. Except with this difference: the literary encounter, because it is conditional, not contingent, not binding, allows us an unconstrained response. Able to explore our feelings without committing to anything, we take the true measure of our own deeper disposition.

Characters can thus touch us profoundly. I don’t think I exaggerate if I affirm that I have been as much affected by D. H. Lawrence’s Rupert Birkin, or Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay, or Saul Bellow’s Charlie Citrine, as I have by any number of flesh-and-blood people in my life. How does this influence work and what are the deeper dynamics of interaction? Real people affect me by way of their presence and by my response to their actions and views. The degree to which they remain with me is determined by the degree to which these energies press upon or modify my own deep-seated ways of being. I have spent hundreds of hours with people who have not left a mark on me at all. By the same token, through whatever operations of identification or projection, I feel that Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* has been one of the profound presences in my life. Woolf has made me privy to her perceptions and emotions, to the rhythms of her thought-process; through her represented consciousness I have known the grain of her most private awareness. I can bring her—or “her”—in close almost effortlessly. I wonder who I have ever known in this way and what I have known. What does it mean for my knowledge that Mrs. Ramsay is a created character? Is it necessarily inferior to the speculative half-knowing I have had with some of my work colleagues?

What is at issue here, obviously, is the reality status of fiction, and this is a philosophical inquiry having everything to do with the nature of knowing itself, with epistemology. The fact that I can’t definitively answer my own questions makes the issue no less central. The questions are vexing because they are, at the deepest level, about the transactions between the self and others. They are psychological and phenomenological. They confirm, if anything, the profound complexity of serious literary engagement, and no argument about the primacy of documentary reportage—how the facts of the world are more fantastic than anything the writer can invent—lessens their impact.



THIS BRINGS ME AROUND to my concealed point of departure, the instigating quote that first sparked off these thoughts, which I had thought to use as my epigraph and then set aside. But it wouldn’t stay suppressed; it surfaced again, insisting.

I found the quote, three sentences from philosopher Gabriel Marcel, in the opening

section of Denis Donoghue's *The Arts Without Mystery*: "A problem ... is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not to be before me in its entirety. . . ."

Neither Marcel nor Donoghue were writing about reading specifically, but when I found the sentences they felt like a sudden illumination. I was struck first by the distinction made between the problem and the mystery, with the clear sense that mystery partakes of the essential, represents a philosophical category of sorts, and, second, by the idea of being caught up in something that is incomplete, obscure in its totality, still to be determined. How apt that seemed to serious reading, the act as I wanted to consider it, as open, intransitive, undertaken with the deep self invested and at stake.

Reading is open, in the world, in life, because reading is the most complex and volatile way we've found to merge the experienced and the imagined. Turning the pages of a challenging novel we spark up not just our intellect, but also our emotional and our dreaming selves. For no matter how precise the author's language, or how explicit the directives, we address the work according to what we need. It is very much an image of our own imagination we encounter, though it is constrained at every point by the narrowed possibilities offered by the text.

I wonder now why it took me so long to come to this, why I denied the deeper importance of re-reading even as I threw myself at it so zealously. Possibly I believed, as most survivors of higher education believe, that a book is somehow used up, finished, by our reading; that it is a device, spring-loaded with themes and characters, which discharges itself fully as we finish, and that anything else—our memories and references—constitutes a kind of dreamlike residue. I no longer think so. Reading infiltrates. Books stay alive, not just in the active imagination, but in the very structures of our awareness. Indeed, I begin to believe that plot, character, and theme, those staple values of the English courses, are the least of the business. They are—if I exaggerate it's only slightly—more a vehicle than the final point of the act. They are the precondition, the necessary pretext, for our absorption of the author's sensibility—the structure of her language, the atmospheric pressure of her subjectivity, the texture of her vision of the world. The reader takes this vision in through every description, every syntactical decision, every orchestrated transition. And while the action stops and the characters are dismissed to their undisclosed future lives, the feeling of that intense presiding presence remains. It cannot be concluded, even if the situations themselves are. Its mysterious chemical life continues.

Here, I think, re-reading discloses its ulterior nature—it is not only the reestablishing of a connection with a set of scenarios once vivid in the mind, a way of checking back in with the imagining self, but is also a way of refreshing a voice, a tonality, that has very likely faded. Faded, but not vanished completely. The decision to re-read a book is not usually an amnesiac's search for clues about what is lost. More likely it is prompted by some flaring up of memory, by a longing to be immersed again in a feeling that we know was important, gratifying, or somehow defining. We return, often, out of curiosity, no question, but also in the hope that something will be given back to us, or reawakened.

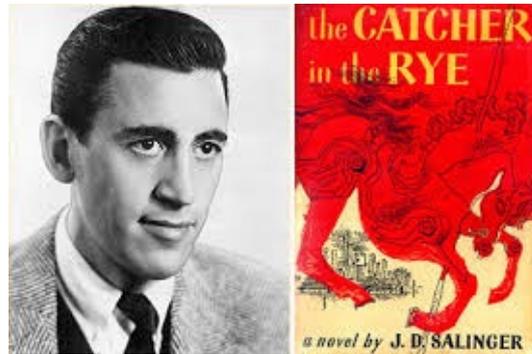
*Lolita* is one novel I go back to every few years. I know it well, if not line by line,

then certainly scene by scene. The twists of plot are inscribed in memory, as are the continually changing dynamics of the characters, dynamics that cover a spectrum from lustful anticipation to the most rending sorrow. I don't need to go back to the book in order to remind myself of any part of the story. I am after something else, something my inner man needs as much as the body needs its potassium or zinc. I require the very particular flavor of the Nabokovian atmosphere, that unique blend of attuned poetic perception, world weariness, mordant dark humor, and desire. This was the note, the vibration, the sustained tonality that so delighted me—so answered me—when I first encountered it and that lodged in me until it became something I wanted to emulate. But though the feeling of it never left me, it did eventually begin to grow dim. I found I needed another dose, another plunge. I was confirmed. When I put myself back in its force field, I had the sharp sensation of stepping back into myself, of return.

This is not to say that Humbert Humbert is some proxy or other self, or that my worldview is his. Thankfully it's not. But the self is thickly, confusingly layered. Under the rubric of a single salient identity, we are many, one transparency grafted upon another. Reading Nabokov's novel brings certain parts of my nature forward: it makes me feel dark and ardent and full of sad human wisdom. Other novels tap other selves. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Our moods do not know one another." No less essential parts of the self thrill with comparable delight to the fatalism of *Madame Bovary*, or the more fluid lyric surges of Woolf, or the muzzy psychological shifts of *The Ambassadors*.

Sometimes I think that the long-term work of reading is to discover, one by one, the books that hold the scattered elements of our nature, after which the true consummation can begin. We undertake the gradual focused exploration, nuance by nuance, of their meanings, their implications; we follow out the strands that mysteriously connect the words of another with the unformulated stuff of the self.

## J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*



All of us who love *The Catcher in the Rye* love it in our own special way—or imagine we do—for the nature of the bond with this book is that it feels like a private place, a sanctum custom-fitted to the contours of every unique alienation and holding for each of us our noblest and most wounded sense of ourselves. Since its first publication in 1951—the year of my birth—narrator Holden Caulfield has been *the* template figure for the American adolescent, far more than James Dean or Elvis Presley or any later morosely sneering teen icon, and his voice remains the truest record of what it feels like to be young and misunderstood. The boy has extraordinary staying power. Much of the counterculture sensibility of the 1960s could be said to have emerged from under his red hunting cap. And the spell continues. My fifteen-year-old daughter now claims it as her favorite novel, and when she recently cited Holden as her most admired character in a school-application essay, the admissions director smiled, observing, “He certainly is a popular choice.”

So much intense adoration, and so many different ways to try to reach the secret. Except that I don’t know that it can be reached. For all the vast cultural influence of the novel, I can’t think of a single piece of criticism that captures the nuances, and I hold out no high hopes for my own success. Indeed, it may just be that *Catcher’s* elusiveness, its resistance to literary vivisection, is what helps assure that it will be fresh from generation to generation. I think of the old law: to pin a thing down is to begin the process of its disenchantment. The last thing I want to do, then, is to turn J. D. Salinger’s novel into an object of study. I don’t want to take it apart, or compare it to anything, or harness the power of its disaffection for my own purposes. I just want to set myself up near it and to think about the pleasure it has given, and to use it to contemplate this business of youth and alienation.

I was about fourteen when I read *Catcher* for the first time, and I’m convinced that for me to grasp the book I have to reconnect with who I was at the time of first contact. This is no small task. Every such approach to the past is a kind of stalking, requiring all sorts of psychological cunning and care. As I discovered several years