

LIBERAL ARTS

FOR THE

CHRISTIAN LIFE

EDITED BY

JEFFRY C. DAVIS &

PHILIP G. RYKEN

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CHAPTER NINE

HOW TO READ A BOOK

Alan Jacobs

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.
—FRANCIS BACON, *OF STUDIES*

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.
—EPHESIANS 3:4–5 (NIV)

In the essay from which I have taken my epigraph, Francis Bacon provides a brief, crisp survey of the challenges facing the person who would be studious. Bacon's language sounds, to the modern ear, solemnly old-fashioned; it comes from a very different world than ours—or so it might seem. But as the historian Ann Blair has commented, Bacon's advice was a response to the early modern era's "information overload"—an overload created by the recent invention of the printing press. With books, pamphlets, and broadsheets rolling off the presses day after day, the European world, long used to the stately pace of hand-copied texts, had a great deal of adjusting to do. Within living memory of people in Bacon and Shakespeare's generation, books had been rare and scarce; but now, quite suddenly, there were more books than anyone could read in a lifetime.

To anyone striving to handle the fire hose of information blasting from our computer screens every day, this must sound like a familiar story. But that just means that Bacon's advice is even more valuable now than it was four hundred years ago. If we want to learn how to read books, Bacon's model serves as a wonderful guide—for readers in general and even for Christian readers in particular, as we shall see.

DISCERNMENT

The first point we will want to note is that not all books deserve the same attention from us. Readers must be discerning in this matter. Note that Bacon does not tell us to read only the greatest books, to live on a diet of masterpieces; rather, he assumes that we will read books of varying quality. Why? Why shouldn't we read the best and only the best?

The poet W. H. Auden once wrote, "When one thinks of the attention that a great poem demands, there is something frivolous about the notion of spending every day with one. Masterpieces should be kept for High Holidays of the Spirit."[1] The word "frivolous" is particularly interesting here: Auden thinks that it would be rather silly to think that we can just sit down any old time and rise to the challenge of a great poem or novel or work of philosophy. Their greatness depends in large part on their determination to challenge us: by forcing us to think thoughts that never would have crossed our minds, by forcefully plunging us into alien experiences, or by gently touching our hearts, such works disrupt the familiar rhythms of our lives. Immanuel Kant once wrote that reading David Hume woke him from a "dogmatic slumber."[2] That's what all great books do to us—but it's hard on the system to be so awakened, and we're not up for that every day.

Moreover, often we read not to be profoundly moved, or even to be entertained, but for plain old information. And this is by no means shameful: as Bacon says, some books are just to be "tasted," that's all, or—dare we say it?—*skimmed.* It may seem scandalous for an English professor to acknowledge the legitimacy of skimming, but I will do more than that: I will confess to being quite an accomplished skimmer myself.

Skimming is really the first stage in the discernment I am recommending: we skim a book to find out whether it appears to be genuinely substantive—to find out whether it deserves more than a skim. And not all books *do* deserve more. Sometimes this is because they are not very good; but sometimes because only a small part of what they contain is needful to a particular reader at a particular time. For instance, I own a very large history of Europe that I have never read from cover to cover but have used several times to learn about a particular European country at a particular point in its

[1]W. H. Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging," in *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Random House, 1962), 37.
[2]Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic* (1783), trans. and ed. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

history. I have skimmed it—"tasted" it, as Bacon would say—and I have a pretty good idea of what's in it, in case I need to return to it some day.

You should rarely *plan* to skim. First impressions can be misleading, and it can also be hard for us to know just what knowledge we need until we read seriously for awhile; moreover, to offer attention to a book (as we shall soon see) is a way of acting charitably toward its writer. For all these reasons it is best to start a book intending to read it "wholly, and with diligence and attention." But if the book proves to be less useful than you had hoped, it is no crime to abandon word-by-word reading and try to glean the major ideas. (One useful technique is to read the first and last sentences of each paragraph.) Sometimes this is all you will need to do; sometimes you will realize that the book deserves careful reading after all; and sometimes the skimming will show you that you don't need to read the book at all. There are no hard-and-fast rules about such things, but you need to be aware of your own temperament—are you naturally impatient and quick to abandon what doesn't immediately grab you?—so you can become discerning in your reading. Skimming *will* be done; it's best that we learn to do it well.

But then, Bacon says, there are those books that deserve to be "swallowed": not sampled on the tongue, so that we know what their flavor is, but sent right down the hatch. Bacon is probably referring to those books that we need to read from beginning to end, the ones we read simply in order to receive the information they contain. Much textbook reading is like this: you need to read it straight through, and you need to remember what you've read, but the book itself is essentially dispensable—it's a vehicle for data. Reading a textbook is often a kind of *uploading*, and successful uploading can be quite a challenge, as anyone who has crammed for an exam knows.

Most students develop, over time, and usually with a good deal of suffering, strategies for reading such books. The strategies often involve highlighters and index cards and sometimes messages scribbled on the inside of a forearm. We won't worry too much about those strategies right now, because whatever they happen to be in your case, they can be strengthened (or perhaps corrected) by reflection on Bacon's third and most important category of reading material.

"Some few," Bacon says, are "to be chewed and digested; that is,

. . . read wholly, and with diligence and attention." Such books provide significant intellectual, and perhaps spiritual, nourishment: we are stronger and healthier and wiser for reading them. But how do we really chew and swallow a book so that we get the maximum nourishment from it? Three things are needful: attentiveness, responsiveness, and charity.

ATTENTIVENESS

Attentiveness has always been hard, though it is probably harder for us than for any people in human history. As the novelist Cory Doctorow writes, "The biggest impediment to concentration is your computer's ecosystem of interruption technologies."[3] And it's not just your computer but also your smartphone, your iPad, and who knows what else. Our reliance on these gadgets—and I say "our" advisedly, being someone just as dependent on them as you—leaves us in a state of what Linda Stone has called "continuous partial attention."[4] Such a state isn't *always* bad; there are pleasures and benefits to being in a high-speed multitasking groove, and if Katherine Hayles is right, this can itself be a kind of attention—"hyper" attention as opposed to "deep" attention.[5] But the more consistently we immerse ourselves in this "ecosystem of interruption technologies," the harder it becomes to live and think any other way. That is why Nicholas Carr writes:

> The problem today is not that we multitask. We've always multitasked. The problem is that we're always in multitasking mode. . . . As a result, we devote ever less time to the calmer, more attentive modes of thinking that have always given richness to our intellectual lives and our culture—the modes of thinking that involve concentration, contemplation, reflection, introspection. The less we practice these habits of mind, the more we risk losing them altogether.[6]

Our always-on multitasking, our continuous partial attention, makes it hard to read books, and it may cause trouble in other areas of

[3]Cory Doctorow, "Writing in an Age of Distraction," *Locus*, January 2009 (http://www.locusmag.com/Features/2009/01/cory-doctorow-writing-in-age-of.html).
[4]Stone coined this term while working as a researcher for Microsoft. She offers a brief and clear explanation of it on her website (http://lindastone.net/qa/continuous-partial-attention/).
[5]N. Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," *Profession* (2007): 187–99.
[6]Nicholar Carr, "Hypermultitasking," *Rough Type* blog, December 10, 2009 (http://www.roughtype.com/archives/2009/12/hypermultitaski.php).

life as well. In the 1930s the Jewish-Christian thinker Simone Weil gave a lecture to some French school girls on the spiritual value of academic study, and in the process gave this wise counsel:

> The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: "What are you going through?" It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive.[7]

Weil goes on to argue that in school we can practice the art of attentiveness, and having learned it, transfer it to God and our neighbors. The person who knows how to *attend* can pray better, listen better, and yes, read better.

It makes sense to think of the books that we are reading as our neighbors: we might not ask them, "What are you going through?" but we really would do well to ask them, "What do you have to say to me?"—and then stay for an answer.[8] This requires a determination to make our attention as full as we can make it, not partial, which, in turn, requires us to shut down the computer and put the phone (set to "silent") well out of reach. After all, how would you feel if you were opening your heart to a friend who claimed to be listening but never stopped texting or updating his Facebook page? Attentiveness is an ethical as well as an intellectual matter; it's about treating our neighbors as they deserve as much as it's about getting facts into our heads.

RESPONSIVENESS

This brings us to the matter of responsiveness. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian polymath who was perhaps the greatest literary theorist of the twentieth century, once commented that in any given conversation the real initiator is the person who listens, not the one who speaks.[9] After

[7]Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1973), 115.
[8]Francis Bacon's essay "Of Truth" (1625) begins thus: "*What is truth?* said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."
[9]Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 280.

all, who would ever speak unless he or she believed that someone would be listening? It is the listener who *elicits* the speech, brings it forth. The speaker counts on a responsive listener. In the same way, a writer counts on a responsive reader.

Furthermore, Bakhtin argues, such a response needs to be more than a mere passive reproduction of the author's intention. That kind of reading "contributes nothing new to the word under consideration. . . . Such an understanding never goes beyond the boundaries of the word's context and in no way enriches the word." Note Bakhtin's core assumptions: that when we speak we want our listeners to "contribute something new" to what we have said and thereby "enrich" our words. Those assumptions may be a little surprising at first, but if we think about actual face-to-face conversations we've had with our friends about important issues, we'll realize that Bakhtin is right. When you're pouring out your heart to others, you don't want them just to nod and repeat your last few words. You want them to offer their own words, as an indication that they have heard you and *thought* about what you've said—have processed it in some meaningful way.

This is what writers want also: for you to "enrich their words" with your own responses. And this is the main reason to read books, especially difficult and challenging books, with a pencil in your hand: not primarily so that you can remember what you've read—though that is nice—but so you can register your reaction. If you are surprised, indicate it with an exclamation point; if you are confused, give the margin a question mark; if you are impressed, a star shows it. (Those are my key symbols, along with a few others. Every careful reader develops his or her own symbolic language: recently I heard of a young woman who marks passages she particularly likes by drawing great big hearts around them.)

Disagreement prompts response, too—in my case often in words rather than symbols: *NO,* I write, or *WRONG*. Often more detailed refutation is needed, so the margin or the white space at the bottom of the page gets filled up, and in some cases the blank pages at the end of the book. But this too is a sign of respect: when I register and explain my disagreement in a book, I demonstrate that I am paying attention and that I *care* about what the author is saying—I want (as the author wants) to get it right. Responsiveness, even critical responsiveness, is a token

of respect and engagement. And yes, writing in your books will help you remember what you've read.

CHARITY

Charity is the one thing most needful for us—in both a universal and a distinctively Christian sense. The philosopher Donald Davidson writes that when we are reading or listening to other people, we operate with a "principle of charity" according to which we assume that they are basically coherent.[10] That is, when we run across an unclear or imprecise statement, we construe it so that it makes some kind of sense. According to Davidson, that's just what people *do*; it's how we get along with one another, conversationally speaking.

I think Davidson is right about what we do, but ascribing charity to such an involuntary action may not be right. Since people usually *do* make sense when they speak, if I assume that the next person I talk to makes sense too, I am just using basic inductive reasoning. It would be strange to do otherwise. But charity in the Christian sense is anything but natural, automatic. It's something we won't even begin unless we are highly conscious of the need for it, which might lead us to ask: In what ways does reading call for charity, and why?

Reading calls for charity because everything we do calls for charity—if by "charity" we mean, as we should, Christian love. Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37–40). Note: *all* the Law and the Prophets are governed by this twofold commandment. And if, as I suggested earlier, it makes sense to say that a book we are reading is, for the duration of the reading experience, our *neighbor*, our obligation to be charitable is even stronger.

Now, charity toward what we read does not mean being nice to what we read. (Jesus himself was unfailingly charitable but not always very nice.) Sometimes charity requires us to be challenging and at times even skeptical. For example, the charitable Christian reader wouldn't pick

[10]Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

up a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and say, "Well, I'm sure there must be something in what you say." That would be loving neither to God nor to our neighbor. Earlier I referred to the need for discernment about the informational value of books, but we need discernment even more when we strive to assess the moral or spiritual character of what we read—and of its likely effect on our own moral and spiritual character. The Scripture says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1)—and this requires a degree of self-testing as well. Just as when deciding whether to skim, we need to be aware of our own temperamental tendencies—to impatience, perhaps—we also need to know our own spiritual strengths and vulnerabilities.

This does *not* mean that we are to set aside every book that we deem unedifying, for there can be very good reasons for reading work that has an unsound and unhealthy spirit. Often such reading is a powerful way of coming to understand the world to which we must respond. But it does mean that we need to work hard to discern those spirits, within a context of prayerful and honest self-assessment.

So if we determine to read a book, what does it mean to read it charitably? Well, charity begins with the two traits we have already mentioned: attentiveness and responsiveness. I have said that those traits are *ethically* important, and they are so because they contribute to charity. We show our willingness to love by our active, alert awareness of what's going on in a book. Having achieved that (as best we can, anyway), we should ask ourselves these questions: How can I read this book in such a way that I grow in the love of God? How can I read it so that I grow in the love of my neighbor? Do I see in its events a pattern of thought or action I should follow? Do I learn something from it about fallen or redeemed human nature? Does it offer me the opportunity to reflect on the glory of creation, or "the fair beauty of the Lord"?[11] Through it, can I see into my own heart—is it a mirror for me?

These are hard questions, and can be tiring even to think about. *Do I have to do all that when I read?* No, you don't—you *can't*. None of us can. My suggestion is not that you force yourself to ask such questions

[11]Psalm 27:4, in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

of every book you read but simply that you be *open* to such questions—that you allow them to enter your heart and mind. It would be a good spiritual discipline to begin each session of reading with a very brief prayer—"Lord, may I hear the word you have for me in this book"—and then to stay for an answer.

WHIM

As I draw this essay to a close, let me turn to a matter that, in my mind, is very important indeed—but not nearly as solemn as what we've been talking about over the past few pages. Recalling Auden's warning that masterpieces of literature should not be our steady diet, we should affirm the great value of reading just for the fun of it. The poet Randall Jarrell tells the story of meeting a literary critic who said that every year he reread his favorite book, Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*, just because he wanted to. Though a critic, he had never written anything about *Kim*, nor did he ever plan to. That one book he read, Jarrell says, "at whim," and Jarrell ends his essay by exhorting us all to "*read at whim!*"[12]

In my experience, Christians are strangely reluctant to take this advice. We tend to be earnest people, always striving for self-improvement, and can be suspicious of mere recreation. But God doesn't just create, he takes delight in his creation, and expects us to delight in it too; and since he has given us the desire to make things ourselves—has allowed us to be "sub-creators," as J. R. R. Tolkien says[13]—we may rightly take delight in the things that we (and others) make.

Reading for the sheer delight of it—reading at whim—is therefore one of the most important kinds of reading there is. By all means strive to be a better reader, to grow in attentiveness, responsiveness, and charity; but whatever you do, don't forget to allow yourself to have fun.

[12]Randall Jarrell, "Poets, Critics, and Readers," in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. Brad Leithauser (New York: Harper, 1999), 229; emphasis original.

[13]Tolkien develops this idea of writing as "sub-creation" chiefly in his long essay "On Fairy Stories," first published in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 38–89.

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JEFFRY C. DAVIS (PhD, University of Illinois, Chicago) is associate professor of English and director of interdisciplinary studies at Wheaton College.

PHILIP G. RYKEN (DPhil, University of Oxford) is president of Wheaton College.

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