

Literary Club

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Joseph P. Tomain

On Reading: Why We Read

Tonight's lesson is entitled "On Reading" and it will be taught by Brother Covata, President Hague, and myself. My colleagues will discuss their reading experiences and I will address the topic "Why We Read."

Now class, write this on your computer, on your iPad, your smartphone, smartwatch, or even in your paper notebook. It will be on the exam. Here is the answer: "We read to pretend." We should read, like Coleridge suggests, by willingly suspending our disbelief. Reading is not knowing that we are pretending; it is the forgetting; the getting lost.

Let's start with an early memory of reading an entire book; either a book given to us by a favorite aunt or a book we picked out after a bike ride to the local library with its many shelves – where, in the sanctum of the stacks, we could choose. My guess is that we are reading a biography, likely about some sports figure or maybe a war hero, a Revolutionary or Civil War general perhaps. We start with these warriors, but we will roam widely because, as the late critic Clive James has written, as children we are "urged to understand everything."

Let's start with sports. Maybe we are reading about that kid from a Baltimore orphan home named George Herman Ruth of candy bar fame. Or we are reading a biography of the Iron Horse before we saw Gary Cooper deliver the most tearful speech in sports movie history about the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I cannot say that I ever pretended being a pro ball player or that I even wanted to. I can, though, confess my desire to be the batboy for the New York Yankees – even for a single day. I could pretend walking across the beige dust in front of the dugout to retrieve a champion's bat as I was blinded by an electric green, which is to say blinded by a professional baseball field.

If not a sportsman, then a West Point graduate – Grant, Lee, MacArthur, Eisenhower. No, I never pretended or ever wanted to be a general. I'm glad I survived Basic. Yet, I have nothing

but admiration for those noble institutions because of those biographies and because of those black and white 1950s TV shows – *West Point Story* and *Men of Annapolis*.

If we are not reading about a sports star or real patriot, maybe we start reading about those little scamps the Hardy Boys. Again, I never had any desire to be a sleuth, but I could pretend to enjoy the camaraderie and excitement of being a member of a neighborhood gang; maybe even a gang of my own. Detective stories seem naturally to lead to foreign adventures – don't they? Quite frankly, I was, and still am, terrified, maybe even traumatized, by the black spot in *Treasure Island*. Well, neither Long John Silver nor Robinson Crusoe nor the Musketeers held any fascination for me; yet I could pretend to have and enjoy adventures. Speaking of adventure stories, how many of us hid 007 behind our algebra books?

Before we leave our first books and favorite aunts, my favorite aunt gave me a subscription to a Catholic Book Club that may well have been called The Lives of the Saints. I am sorry to confess that those books did not take hold. I cannot remember reading about any of the Gospel gang or the Apostle crowd or even the early Christian martyrs. My reaction to those stories was best expressed by one of my Christian Brother Academy high school teachers who called call such hagiography pious piffle.

I do, though, remember one book from that club that I had to read slowly and had to reread passages to understand. The story was about a curé, a parish priest, in a French village. The parishioners began having odd feelings and sensations; then they had odd dreams that turned into hallucinations – clearly the devil was nigh. The curé had his hands full, yet he solved the mystery. It was not the work of the devil. The phantasms were caused by a fungus in the local mushroom crop. The idea of being a parish priest managing his village flock through their tribulations was not at all inviting. I was, though, fascinated by the mushroom story. Enough said.

On to men of science, I remember *pretentiously* taking a book from the public library with the title $E=MC^2$. I could not pretend to be a scientist but I could pretend to try to understand the special theory of relativity. Unfortunately, I still can't quite figure out how Einstein's moving train metaphor explains how speed, light, time, and mass are somehow exchangeable. Maybe someday; with more reading.

By not pretending to be a New York Yankee or a detective or a genius physicist maybe I either have insufficient ambition or I possess an impoverished fantasy life. As President Hague said last week – “So it goes.”

As we put our youthful toys behind us; the simple story books we read miraculously turn into novels; then those novels miraculously turn into something called fiction as we learn, like Moliere’s *Gentlemen*, that it is prose that we are reading. As we read prose, we read about Leopold Bloom and Nick Caraway and Rabbit Angstrom and Don Quixote and Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary; characters that we later learn are “flawed protagonists.” It’s not that we admire these characters necessarily; it’s that we, fortunately or unfortunately, understand them; we recognize ourselves in them; we begin to recognize innocence lost. We don’t pretend to be those characters; we hope we aren’t. Yet, we fully buy into Camus's declaration that fiction is the lie that tells the truth. There is something in fiction that resonates in the lives we live or that we imagine we do. Toni Morrison thinks so. She wrote “. . . fictional literature may be the last and only route to remembrance, the only staunch in the wasteful draining away of conscience and memory.”

As we continue to read, which is to say as we age, we shift focus from characters to writers. Which authors captured us in high school? After *Catcher in the Rye* did we go on to devour Salinger? After did we read all of Kerouac? Did we read all of Ian Fleming? Did we think we could become a public intellectual if we read a lot of Mailer or Baldwin?

We shift from story to writer and then to the writing. We become entranced by the magic of the words on the page. What though is the attraction? Maybe, as critic James Wood claims “We are, in a way, all internal fiction writers and poets”

Since I have mentioned high school, I am sure that many of you are thinking – there is at least one reason to read other than for pretending – we read because we have to! Ah yes, the problem of required reading.

We are required to read to take a test, to pass an examination, to earn a degree, or to just get our work done. There's less pretense in required reading than necessity. And there is something dispassionate, lifeless maybe, about required reading. Let’s see. Here’s a pop quiz: How many of us embraced Shakespeare or poetry in high school?

And yet, just perhaps, required reading is a pathway or an opening for us. I will put down cold cash on the proposition that many of us embrace Shakespeare and poetry now a few short years after high school.

As we go to college and beyond – we find other subjects. History is an obvious choice because it is pretty much like the stories that first attracted us; it just has more dates and names and it has a fancier title because it is a discipline; it is a genre. Beyond history, we find philosophy, theology, science, economics, even law, and others.

Now we move into deeper waters. Once we have passed from something called fiction to something called non-fiction, is it still possible to pretend? As we read in the hard and social sciences, don't we say, and believe, that we read to learn and to accumulate knowledge rather than read to pretend? Still, I wonder. Isn't the very idea of reading for knowledge a grand pretense? That old horse-botherer Socrates most certainly thought so.

Socrates' grand conceit was that "Unlike you pretenders, fakers, posers, at least I know what I do not know." Is Socratic ignorance ironic? Or was he just an annoying pain in the ass? How could he really know what, or even, that he didn't know? But, isn't it actually the case that we read because we are ignorant? We read because we do not know. If we already know, then why read at all? Instead, set up a tee time.

So let me ask: Can we really say that we really "know" anything? Don't we all believe in some form of ignorance. Here's our second pop quiz. Haven't we all pled ignorance to the following question: "Honey, the toilet's broke, can you fix it?" We can, I am sure, respond in unison: "I don't know how." But Socratic ignorance is of a different order.

We are caught in an ambiguity about knowledge. On the one hand, as Aristotle told us, all men desire to know. On the other hand, reading one book, or several, is truly a pretense of knowledge that leads us, erotically it might be said, to other books. We are excited to learn, and we want to quench our desire to know; we try to satisfy our pretense of knowledge through further reading. The antidote to required reading, that more reading helps, then pushes us in three directions. We are drawn to read more broadly and read more deeply. Then we are compelled to ask questions. Ask questions? Ah, Socrates was on to something.

Let's try an example or two. From reading history, did Lincoln enter the Civil War to save the Union or end slavery? Or both? After having read even a thorough history of the French Revolution, do we understand it? Maybe we should read Tocqueville or Edmund Burke or more modern historians. Could Louis XVI have held the monarchy together and avoided the Terror? What is the relationship between the American Revolution and the French Revolution, if any? Consider the First World War. Why did it start? What did it mean for Europe? For America? For the rest of the 20th century? And, now for the 21st? And what about the Vietnam war? Would JFK have withdrawn troops or moved them more deeply into the muck? Why didn't LBJ pull out? Did Nixon and Kissinger fuss with initial peace talks?

Reading in the hard sciences, what is string theory and is it a theory of everything? Can we find a reliable answer, and then claim knowledge, by reading Hawking or Greene or Feynman or Weinberg? Will higher math find either an end to or a recurrent number sequence in pi? Is mathematics an essential dimension of nature, or does it essentially spring from the mind of man?

Onto the social sciences, was the trickle-down theory of economics actually an economic theory or a political cover? Did the New Deal save capitalism or destroy it? Moving back to literature, was Elliot an anti-Semite? Was Pound crazy? Did Emily Dickinson have a love interest in her sister-in-law? Or consider art and architecture. Did Michelangelo paint the whole Sistine ceiling alone and on his back? How was Brunelleschi's Dome built? Or the pyramids? Or Stonehenge? I don't know the answer to any of these questions. Maybe if I just read a little bit more.

T.S. Eliot once asked: where is the knowledge lost in information; where is the wisdom lost in knowledge? If we read for information, then we will miss knowledge; if we read for knowledge then we will skirt wisdom. Nevertheless, isn't there value here, here in the pretending? Through reading we can pretend knowledge; we can pretend wisdom. And still, we can admit that the human condition is such that we are forever condemned (or blessed) to not find Truth; We are forever blessed (or condemned) to not find Wisdom. Yet we persist.

Naturally we read for practical purposes. It is through reading, through pretending knowledge, or more ambitiously through pretending wisdom, we acquire the ability to express our own opinions, make decisions, and offer judgements. As Harold Bloom quips: "It matters, if

individuals are to have any capacity to form their own judgments and opinions, that they must continue to read.”

Yet why? Why is it in the nature of man to want to know and be wise and know that we can never possess either? It is because our desire for knowledge and wisdom, necessarily imperfect, makes us human.

So, early in our reading lives we read to pretend; then we read to pretend knowledge and wisdom. We should take our pretense one more step and ask: What is pretense other than imagination? Now, with imagination we are entering very risky territory because memory is a terribly unreliable narrator.

Yet, it is through our imagination, together with our memories and experiences, that we construct – literally build, create – our moral lives. It is through the faculty of imagination that we become ourselves. To borrow a phrase from philosopher Martha Nussbaum, it is through reading that we cultivate our humanity. According to Alberto Manguel, “We all read ourselves and the world around us in order to glimpse what and where we are.” And according to Flaubert we “read in order to live.”

So here we are, we read to pretend, and we pretend to imagine, and we imagine to become ourselves. The alchemy of mind over self is a function and consequence of reading.

So, class, let's close, as we should, with Socrates. Socrates did profess ignorance. He also pursued wisdom. He wondered about the good life, and he warned us that the unexamined life is not worth living. How better to examine our lives than through reading? Clive James says that we bring our moral lives to our reading. I wonder, though, if it's not the other way around. Our reading shapes and forms our moral lives.

Socratic ignorance is nothing more than acknowledging our human inability to know or be able to know everything (or anything) fully and certainly not able to know the Truth. Yet, if the Socratic command is to live the examined life, then how better to do so than through reading? Gentlemen that question is intentionally rhetorical because two of our brethren will provide us with answers.

Sources

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