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HOW TO READ AND WHY

HAROLD BLOOM

Author of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* and editor of *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages*

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HAROLD BLOOM

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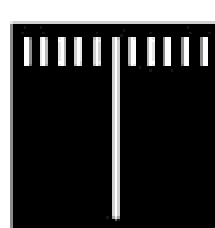

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The reader became the book; and summer night
Was like the conscious being of the book.

—Wallace Stevens

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PREFACE

There is no single way to read well, though there is a prime reason why we should read. Information is endlessly available to us; where shall wisdom be found? If you are fortunate, you encounter a particular teacher who can help, yet finally you are alone, going on without further mediation. Reading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you, because it is, at least in my experience, the most healing of pleasures. It returns you to otherness, whether in yourself or in friends, or in those who may become friends. Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness. We read not only because we cannot know enough people, but because friendship is so vulnerable, so likely to diminish or disappear, overcome by space, time, imperfect sympathies, and all the sorrows of familial and passional life.

This book teaches how to read and why, proceeding by a multitude of examples and instances: poems short and long; stories and novels and plays. The selections should not be interpreted as an exclusive list of what to read, but rather as a sampling of works that best illustrate why to read. Reading well is best pursued as an implicit discipline; finally there is no method but yourself, when your self has been fully molded. Literary criticism, as I have learned to understand it, ought to be experiential and pragmatic, rather than theoretical. The critics who are my masters—Dr. Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt in particular—practice their art in order to make what is implicit in a book finely explicit. In what follows, whether I deal with a lyric by A. E. Housman or a play by Oscar Wilde, with a story by Jorge Luis Borges or a novel by Mar-

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cel Proust, my principal concern will be with ways of noticing and realizing what can and should be made explicit. Because, for me, the question of how to read always leads on to the motives and uses of reading, I shall never separate the "how" and the "why" of this book's subject. Virginia Woolf, in "How Should One Read a Book?"—the final brief essay in her *Second Common Reader*—charmingly warns: "The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice." But she then adds many codicils to the reader's enjoyment of freedom, culminating in the grand question "Where are we to begin?" To get the deepest and widest pleasures of reading, "we must not squander our powers, helplessly and ignorantly." So it seems that, until we become wholly ourselves, some advice about reading may be helpful, even perhaps essential.

Woolf herself had found that advice in Walter Pater (whose sister had tutored her), and also in Dr. Johnson and in the Romantic critics Thomas De Quincey and William Hazlitt, of whom she wonderfully remarked: "He is one of those rare critics who have thought so much that they can dispense with reading." Woolf thought incessantly, and never would stop reading. She herself had a good deal of advice to give to other readers, and I have happily taken it throughout this book. Her best advice is to remind us that "there is always a demon in us who whispers, 'I hate, I love,' and we cannot silence him." I cannot silence my demon, but in this book anyway I will listen to him only when he whispers, "I love," as I intend no polemics here, but only to teach reading.

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PROLOGUE

Why Read?

It matters, if individuals are to retain any capacity to form their own judgments and opinions, that they continue to read for themselves. How they read, well or badly, and what they read, cannot depend wholly upon themselves, but why they read must be for and in their own interest. You can read merely to pass the time, or you can read with an overt urgency, but eventually you will read against the clock. Bible readers, those who search the Bible for themselves, perhaps exemplify the urgency more plainly than readers of Shakespeare, yet the quest is the same. One of the uses of reading is to prepare ourselves for change, and the final change alas is universal.

I turn to reading as a solitary praxis, rather than as an educational enterprise. The way we read now, when we are alone with ourselves, retains considerable continuity with the past, however it is performed in the academies. My ideal reader (and lifelong hero) is Dr. Samuel Johnson, who knew and expressed both the power and the limitation of incessant reading. Like every other activity of the mind, it must satisfy Johnson's prime concern, which is with "what comes near to ourself, what we can put to use." Sir Francis Bacon, who provided some of the ideas that Johnson put to use, famously gave the advice: "Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider." I add to Bacon and Johnson a third sage of reading,

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Emerson, fierce enemy of history and of all historicisms, who remarked that the best books "impress us with the conviction, that one nature wrote and the same reads." Let me fuse Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson into a formula of how to read: find what comes near to you that can be put to the use of weighing and considering, and that addresses you as though you share the one nature, free of time's tyranny. Pragmatically that means, first find Shakespeare, and let him find you. If *King Lear* is fully to find you, then weigh and consider the nature it shares with you; its closeness to yourself. I do not intend this as an idealism, but as a pragmatism. Putting the tragedy to use as a complaint against patriarchy is to forsake your own prime interests, particularly as a young woman, which sounds rather more ironical than it is. Shakespeare, more than Sophocles, is the inescapable authority upon intergenerational conflict, and more than anyone else, upon the differences between women and men. Be open to a full reading of *King Lear*, and you will understand better the origins of what you judge to be patriarchy.

Ultimately we read—as Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson agree—in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests. We experience such augmentations as pleasure, which may be why aesthetic values have always been deprecated by social moralists, from Plato through our current campus Puritans. The pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else's life by reading better or more deeply. I remain skeptical of the traditional social hope that care for others may be stimulated by the growth of individual imagination, and I am wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good.

The sorrow of professional reading is that you recapture only rarely the pleasure of reading you knew in youth, when books were a Hazlittian gusto. The way we read now partly depends upon our distance, inner or outer, from the universities, where reading is scarcely taught as a pleasure, in any of the deeper senses of the aes-

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thetics of pleasure. Opening yourself to a direct confrontation with Shakespeare at his strongest, as in *King Lear,* is never an easy pleasure, whether in youth or in age, and yet not to read *King Lear* fully (which means without ideological expectations) is to be cognitively as well as aesthetically defrauded. A childhood largely spent watching television yields to an adolescence with a computer, and the university receives a student unlikely to welcome the suggestion that we must endure our going hence even as our going hither: ripeness is all. Reading falls apart, and much of the self scatters with it. All this is past lamenting, and will not be remedied by any vows or programs. What is to be done can only be performed by some version of elitism, and that is now unacceptable, for reasons both good and bad. There are still solitary readers, young and old, everywhere, even in the universities. If there is a function of criticism at the present time, it must be to address itself to the solitary reader, who reads for herself, and not for the interests that supposedly transcend the self.

Value, in literature as in life, has much to do with the idiosyncratic, with the excess by which meaning gets started. It is not accidental that historicists—critics who believe all of us to be overdetermined by societal history—should also regard literary characters as marks upon a page, and nothing more. Hamlet is not even a case history if our thoughts are not at all our own. I come then to the first principle if we are to restore the way we read now, a principle I appropriate from Dr. Johnson: *Clear your mind of cant.* Your dictionary will tell you that *cant* in this sense is speech overflowing with pious platitudes, the peculiar vocabulary of a sect or coven. Since the universities have empowered such covens as "gender and sexuality" and "multiculturalism," Johnson's admonition thus becomes "Clear your mind of academic cant." A university culture where the appreciation of Victorian women's underwear replaces the appreciation of Charles Dickens and Robert Browning sounds like the outrageousness of a new Nathanael West, but is merely

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I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch—
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

Women and men can walk differently, but unless we are regimented we all tend to walk somewhat individually. Dickinson, master of the precarious Sublime, can hardly be apprehended if we are dead to her ironies. She is walking the only path available, "from Plank to Plank," but her slow caution ironically juxtaposes with a titanism in which she feels "The Stars about my Head," though her feet very nearly are in the sea. Not knowing whether the next step will be her "final inch" gives her "that precarious Gait" she will not name, except to tell us that "some" call it Experience. She had read Emerson's essay "Experience," a culmination much in the way "Of Experience" was for his master Montaigne, and her irony is an amiable response to Emerson's opening: "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none." The extreme, for Dickinson, is the not knowing whether the next step is the final inch. "If any of us knew what we were doing, or where we are going, then when we think we best know!" Emerson's further reverie differs from Dickinson's in temperament, or as she words it, in gait. "All things swim and glitter," in Emerson's realm of experience, and his genial irony is very different from her irony of precariousness. Yet neither is an ideologue, and they live still in the rival power of their ironies.

At the end of the path of lost irony is a final inch, beyond which literary value will be irrecoverable. Irony is only a metaphor, and the irony of one literary age can rarely be the irony of another, yet

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without the renaissance of an ironic sense more than what we once called imaginative literature will be lost. Thomas Mann, most ironic of this century's great writers, seems to be lost already. New biographies of him appear, and are reviewed almost always on the basis of his homoeroticism, as though he can be saved for our interest only if he can be certified as gay, and so gain a place in our curriculum. That is akin to studying Shakespeare mostly for his apparent bisexuality, but the vagaries of our current counter-Puritanism seem limitless. Shakespeare's ironies, as we would expect, are the most comprehensive and dialectical in all of Western literature, and yet they do not always mediate his characters' passions for us, so vast and intense is their emotional range. Shakespeare therefore will survive our era; we will lose his ironies, and hold on to the rest of him. But in Thomas Mann every emotion, narrative or dramatic, is mediated by an ironic aestheticism; to teach *Death in Venice* or *Disorder and Early Sorrow* to most current undergraduates, even the gifted, is nearly impossible. When authors are destroyed by history, we rightly call their work period pieces, but when they are made unavailable through historicized ideology, I think that we encounter a different phenomenon.

Irony demands a certain attention span, and the ability to sustain antithetical ideas, even when they collide with one another. Strip irony away from reading, and it loses at once all discipline and all surprise. Find now what comes near to you, that can be used for weighing and considering, and it very likely will be irony, even if many of your teachers will not know what it is, or where it is to be found. Irony will clear your mind of the cant of the ideologues, and help you to blaze forth as the scholar of one candle.

Going on seventy, one doesn't want to read badly any more than live badly, since time will not relent. I don't know that we owe God or nature a death, but nature will collect anyway, and we certainly owe mediocrity nothing, whatever collectivity it purports to advance or at least represent.

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Because my ideal reader, for half a century, has been Dr. Samuel Johnson, I turn next to my favorite passage in his *Preface to Shakespeare:*

> This, therefore, is the praise of Shakespeare, that his drama is the mirror of life; that he who has mazed his imagination in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world and a confessor predict the progress of the passions.

To read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you. You are more than an ideology, whatever your convictions, and Shakespeare speaks to as much of you as you can bring to him. That is to say: Shakespeare reads you more fully than you can read him, even after you have cleared your mind of cant. No writer before or since Shakespeare has had anything like his control of perspectivism, which outleaps any contextualizations we impose upon the plays. Johnson, admirably perceiving this, urges us to allow Shakespeare to cure us of our "delirious ecstasies." Let me extend Johnson by also urging us to recognize the phantoms that the deep reading of Shakespeare will exorcise. One such phantom is the Death of the Author; another is the assertion that the self is a fiction; yet another is the opinion that literary and dramatic characters are so many marks upon a page. A fourth phantom, and the most pernicious, is that language does the thinking for us.

Still, my love for Johnson, and for reading, turns me at last away from polemic, and towards a celebration of the many solitary readers I keep encountering, whether in the classroom or in messages I receive. We read Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Dickens, Proust, and all their peers because they more than enlarge life. Pragmatically, they have become the Blessing, in its true Yahwistic sense of "more life into a time without boundaries." We read

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deeply for varied reasons, most of them familiar: that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are. Yet the strongest, most authentic motive for deep reading of the now much-abused traditional canon is the search for a difficult pleasure. I am not exactly an erotics-of-reading purveyor, and a pleasurable difficulty seems to me a plausible definition of the Sublime, but a higher pleasure remains the reader's quest. There is a reader's Sublime, and it seems the only secular transcendence we can ever attain, except for the even more precarious transcendence we call "falling in love." I urge you to find what truly comes near to you, that can be used for weighing and for considering. Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads.

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Turgenev out grouse-shooting. The hunter loses his way and comes at night to a meadowland where a group of five peasant boys sit around two fires. Joining them, Turgenev introduces us to them. They range in age from seven to fourteen, and all of them believe in "goblins," "the little people," who share their world. Turgenev's art wisely allows the boys to talk to one another, while he listens and does not intrude. Their life of hard work (they and their parents are serfs), superstition, village legend, is revealed to us, complete with Trishka, the Antichrist to come, enticing mermaids who catch souls, the walking dead, and those marked to die. One boy, Pavlusha, stands out from the rest as the most intelligent and likable. He demonstrates his courage when he rushes forth bare-handed to drive away what could be wolves, who threaten the grazing horses that the boys guard in the night.

After some hours, Turgenev falls asleep, to wake up just before dawn. The boys sleep on, though Pavlusha raises himself up for a last, intense glance at the hunter. Turgenev starts home, describing the beautiful morning, and then ends the sketch by adding that, later that year, Pavlusha died in a fall from a horse. We feel the pity of the loss, with Turgenev, who remarks that Pavlusha was a fine boy, but the pathos of the death is not rendered as such. A continuum engages us: the beauty of the meadow and of the dawn; the vividness of the boys' preternatural beliefs; the fate, not to be evaded, that takes away Pavlusha. And the rest? That is the pragmatic yet somehow still quixotic Turgenev, shooting his grouse and sketching the boys and the landscape in his album.

Why read "Bezhin Lea"? At the least, to know better our own reality, our vulnerability to fate, while learning also to appreciate aesthetically Turgenev's tact and only apparent detachment as a storyteller. If there is any irony in this sketch, it belongs to fate itself, a fate just about as innocent as the landscape, the boys, the hunter. Turgenev is one of the most Shakespearean of writers in that he too refrains from moral judgments; he also knows that a favorite, like Pavlusha, will vanish by a sudden accident. There is

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no single interpretative point to carry away from the Bezhin meadow. The narrative voice is not to be distinguished from Turgenev's own self, which is wisely passive, loving, meticulously observant. That self, like Pavlusha's, is part of the story's value. Something in most of us is where it wants to be, with the boys, the horses, the compassionate hunter-writer, the talk of goblins and river temptresses, in perfect weather, in Bezhin Lea.

To achieve Turgenev's apparent simplicity as a writer of sketches you need the highest gifts, something very like Shakespeare's genius for rediscovering the human. Turgenev too shows us something that perhaps is always there, but that we could not see without him. Dostoevsky learned from Shakespeare how to create the supreme nihilists Svidrigailov and Stavrogin by observing Iago, satanic majesty of all nihilists. Turgenev, like Henry James, learned something subtler from Shakespeare: the mystery of the seemingly commonplace, the rendering of a reality that is perpetually augmenting.

Directly after "Bezhin Lea" comes "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands," where Turgenev gives us a fully miraculous character, the dwarf Kasyan, a mystical serf and faith healer, perhaps a sect of one. Returning from a hunting trip, the author's horse-drawn cart suffers a broken axle. In a nearby town that is no town, Turgenev and his surly driver encounter

> a dwarf of about fifty years old, with a small, swarthy, wrinkled face, a little painted nose, barely discernible little brown eyes and abundant curly black hair which sat upon his tiny head just as broadly as the cap sits on the stalk of a mushroom. His entire body was extraordinarily frail and thin . . .
>
> (Translated by Richard Freeborn)

We are constantly reminded how uncanny, how unexpected Kasyan truly is. Though his voice invariably is gentle and sweet, he severely condemns hunting as ungodly, and he maintains throughout a strong dignity, as well as the sorrow of an exile,

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resettled by the authorities and so deprived of "the beautiful lands" of the Don region. Everything about little Kasyan is paradoxical; Turgenev's driver explains that the dwarf is a holy man known as The Flea.

Hunter and healer go off together for a walk in the woods while the axle is being mended. Gathering herbs, jumping as he goes, muttering to himself, Kasyan speaks to the birds in their own language, but says not a word to Turgenev. Driven by the heat to find shelter together in the bushes, hunter and holy dwarf enjoy their silent reveries until Kasyan demands justification for the shooting of birds. When Turgenev asks the dwarf's occupation, Kasyan replies that he catches nightingales to give them away to others, that he is literate, and admits his healing powers. And though he says he has no family, his secret is revealed when his small, teenage natural daughter, Annushka, suddenly appears in the woods. The child is beautiful and shy, and has been out gathering mushrooms. Though Kasyan denies his parentage, neither we nor Turgenev are persuaded, and after the child departs, Kasyan scarcely speaks for the remainder of the story.

We are left with enigmas, as his driver can scarcely enlighten Turgenev when they depart; to him Kasyan is nothing but contradictions: "untellable." Nothing more is told, and Turgenev returns home. His thoughts on Kasyan remain unexpressed, but do we need them? The peasant healer lives in his own world, not the Russia of the serfs but a Russian vision of the biblical world, albeit totally unlike the rival biblical visions of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Kasyan, though he shies away from rebellion, has rejected Russian society and returned to the arts and ways of the folk. He will not let his daughter abide a moment in the presence of the benign Turgenev, who admires the child's beauty. One need not idealize Kasyan; his peasant shrewdness and perceptions exclude a great deal of value, but he incarnates truths of folklore that he himself may scarcely know that he knows.

The dominant atmosphere of Turgenev's sketches is the beauty

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of the landscape when experienced in ideal weather. Yet there is a large difference between the natural beauty shared by Turgenev and the peasant boys in "Bezhin Lea," and the something less than communion between Kasyan and Turgenev when they shade themselves in the forest. Pavlusha's fate cannot be resisted, only accepted, but Kasyan is, in his own subtle way, as much a magical master of reality as Shakespeare's Prospero was. Kasyan's magical natural world is not akin to Turgenev's aesthetically apprehended nature, even when holy man and hunter-writer rest side by side. Nor will Kasyan admit Turgenev into his secret, or even a momentary exchange with his beautiful elf of a daughter. Finally, we come to see that Kasyan is still "from the beautiful lands," even though he has lost his original home near the Don. "The beautiful lands" belong to closed folk tradition, of which Kasyan is a kind of shaman. We read "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands" to attain a vision of otherness closed to all but a few of us, and closed to Turgenev as well. The reward for reading Kasyan's story is that we are admitted—very briefly—into an alternate reality, where Turgenev himself entered only briefly, and yet sublimely brought back in his *Sketches.*

Anton Chekhov

It is a long journey from Turgenev's stories to Chekhov's and Hemingway's, even though the Nick Adams stories could have been called *Sketches from a Fisherman's Album.* Still, Turgenev, Chekhov, and Hemingway share a quality that looks like detachment, and turns out to be something else. Their affinity with their landscape and human figures is central in Turgenev, Chekhov, and Hemingway. This is very different from the sense of immersion in social worlds and in geysers of characters in Balzac and in Dickens. The genius of both novelists was lavish at peopling Paris and London with entire social classes as well as grotesquely impres-

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sive individuals. Balzac, unlike Dickens, excelled also at the short story, and built many of them into his *Human Comedy.* Yet they lack the resonances of Balzac's novels, and cannot compare to the stories of Turgenev and Chekhov, Maupassant and Hemingway.

Even Chekhov's earliest stories can have the formal delicacy and somber reflectiveness that make him the indispensable artist of the unlived life, and the major influence upon all story-writers after him. I say *all* because Chekhov's formal innovations as a storyteller, though profuse, are less consequential than his Shakespearean inwardness, his carrying over into the stories, longer or shorter, the major newness in Shakespeare's characterizations, a "foregrounding" that I discuss elsewhere in this book, in regard to *Hamlet.* In a sense, Chekhov was more Shakespearean even than Turgenev, who in his novels took care to background the earlier lives of his protagonists. One should write, Chekhov said, so that the reader needs no explanations from the author. The actions, conversations, and meditations of the characters had to be sufficient, a practice followed also in Chekhov's finest plays, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard.*

My favorite early Chekhov story is "The Kiss," written when he was twenty-seven. Ryabovich, the "shyest, drabbest, and most retiring officer" in an artillery brigade, accompanies his fellow officers to an evening social at the country manor of a retired general. Wandering about the house, the bored Ryabovich enters a dark room and experiences an adventure. Mistaking him for someone else, a woman kisses him, and recoils. He rushes away, and henceforth is obsessed with the encounter, which initially brings exultation but then becomes a torment. The wretched fellow is in love, albeit with a woman totally unknown and never to be encountered again.

When his brigade next approaches the general's manor, Ryabovich walks upon a little bridge, near the bathhouse, where he reaches out and touches a wet sheet, hanging there to dry. A sensation of cold and roughness assails him, and he glances down at the

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pondering. Nothing in "The Student," except what happens in the protagonist's mind, is anything but dreadfully dismal. It is the irrational rise of impersonal joy and personal hope out of cold and misery, and the tears of betrayal, that appears to have moved Chekhov himself.

A late story, "The Lady with the Dog," of 1899, is among my favorites by Chekhov, and is generally regarded as being one of his finest. Gurov, a married man vacationing alone in Yalta, the seaside resort, is moved by encountering a fair young woman always accompanied by her white Pomeranian. An incessant womanizer, Gurov begins an affair with the lady, Anna Sergeyevna, herself unhappily married. She departs, insisting that the farewell must be forever. Experienced amorist as he is, Gurov accepts this with an autumnal relief, and returns to his wife and children in Moscow, only to find himself haunted and suffering. Has he fallen in love, presumably for the first time? He does not know, nor does Chekhov, so we cannot know either. Yet he is certainly obsessed, and therefore travels to Anna Sergeyevna's provincial town, where he seeks her out when she attends the opera. Anguished, she urges him to go immediately, promising that she will visit him in Moscow.

The Moscow meetings, every two or three months, become a tradition, enjoyable enough for Gurov, but hardly for the perpetually weeping Anna Sergeyevna. Until at last, catching sight of himself in a mirror, Gurov sees that his hair is graying, and simultaneously awakens to the incessant dilemma he has entered, which he interprets as his belated falling in love. What is to be done? Gurov at once feels that he and his beloved are on the verge of a beautiful new life, and also that the end of the relationship is far off, and the hardest part of their mutual travail has just begun.

That is all Chekhov gives us, but the reverberations go on long after this conclusion that concludes nothing. Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna are evidently both somewhat changed, but not necessarily for the better. Nothing either can do for the other is redemp-

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tive; what then redeems their story from its mundane staleness? How does it differ from the tale of every other hapless adultery?

Not by our interest in Gurov and Anna, as any reader would have to conclude; there is nothing remarkable about them. He is another womanizer, and she another weeping woman. Chekhov's artistry is never more mysterious than here, where it is palpable yet scarcely definable. Clearly Anna is in love, though Gurov is hardly a worthy object. Just how to value the mournful Anna, we cannot know. What passes between the lovers is presented by Chekhov with such detachment that we lack not information but judgment, including our own. For the story is weirdly laconic in its universalism. Does Gurov really believe that at last he has fallen in love? He has no clue, nor does the reader, and if Chekhov knows, he won't tell us. As in Shakespeare, where Hamlet tells us that he loves, and we don't know if we can believe him, we are not tempted to trust Gurov's assertion that this at last is the real right thing. Anna complains bitterly that theirs is a "dark secret love" (to use William Blake's great phrase from his "The Sick Rose"), but Gurov seems to revel in the secret life, which he thinks uncovers his true self. He is a banker, and doubtless many bankers have true selves, but Gurov isn't one of them. The reader can credit Anna's tears, but not Gurov's "How? How? How?" as he clutches his head. Chekhov-in-love parodied himself in *The Seagull*'s Trigorin, and I suggest that Gurov is a more transposed self-parody. We don't much like Gurov, and we want Anna to stop crying, but we cannot cast their story off, because it is our story.

Gorky says of Chekhov that he was "able to reveal in the dim sea of banality its tragic humor." It sounds naïve, and yet Chekhov's greatest power is to give us the impression, as we read, that here at last is the truth about human existence's constant blend of banal misery and tragic joy. Shakespeare was Chekhov's (and our) authority on tragic joy, but the banal does not appear in Shakespeare, even when he writes travesty or farce.

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Guy de Maupassant

Chekhov had learned from Maupassant how to represent banality. Maupassant, who had learned everything, including that, from his master, Flaubert, rarely matches the genius of Chekhov, or of Turgenev, as a storyteller. Lev Shestov, a remarkable Russian religious thinker of the earlier twentieth century, expressed this with considerable force:

> Chekhov's wonderful art did not die—his art to kill by a mere touch, a breath, a glance, everything whereby men live and wherein they take their pride. And in the art he was constantly perfecting himself, and he attained to a virtuosity beyond the reach of any of his rivals in European literature. Maupassant often had to strain every effort to overcome his victim. The victim often escaped from Maupassant, though crushed and broken, yet with his life. In Chekhov's hands, nothing escaped death.

That is a very dark view and no reader wants to think of herself as a writer's victim, and yet Shestov accurately weighs Maupassant against Chekhov, rather as one might weigh Christopher Marlowe against Shakespeare. Yet Maupassant is the best of the really "popular" story-writers, vastly superior to O. Henry (who could be quite good) and greatly preferable to the abominable Poe. To be an artist of the popular is itself an extraordinary achievement; we have nothing like it in the United States today.

Chekhov can seem simple, but is always profoundly subtle; many of Maupassant's simplicities are merely what they seem to be, yet they are not shallow. Maupassant had learned from his teacher, Flaubert, that "talent is a prolonged patience" at seeing what others tend not to see. Whether Maupassant can make us see what we could never have seen without him, I very much doubt. That calls for the genius of Shakespeare, or of Chekhov.

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There is also the problem that Maupassant, like so many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers of fiction, saw everything through the lens of Arthur Schopenhauer, philosopher of the Will-to-Live. I would just as soon wear Schopenhauerian as Freudian goggles; both enlarge and both distort, almost equally. But I am a literary critic, not a story-writer, and Maupassant would have done better to discard philosophical spectacles when he contemplated the vagaries of the desires of men and of women.

At his best, he is marvelously readable, whether in the humorous pathos of "Madame Tellier's Establishment" or in a horror story like "The Horla," both of which I shall consider here. Frank O'Connor insisted that Maupassant's stories were not satisfactory when compared to those of Chekhov and Turgenev, but then few story-writers rival the two Russian masters. O'Connor's real objection was that he thought "the sexual act itself turns into a form of murder" in Maupassant. A reader who has just enjoyed "Madame Tellier's Establishment" would hardly agree. Flaubert, who did not live to write it, wished to set his final novel in a provincial whorehouse, which his son had already done in this robust story.

Everyone in "Madame Tellier's Establishment" is benign and amiable, which is part of the story's authentic charm. Madame Tellier, a respectable Norman peasant, keeps her establishment as one might run an inn or even a boarding school. Her five sex-workers (as some call them now) are vividly, even lovingly described by Maupassant, who emphasizes the peace kept in the house by Madame's talent for conciliation, and her incessant good humor.

On an evening in May, none of the regular clients are in good humor, because the establishment is festooned with a notice: CLOSED FOR A FIRST COMMUNION. Madame and her staff have gone off for this event, the celebrant being Madame's niece (and goddaughter). The First Communion develops into an extraordinary occasion when the prolonged weeping of the whores, moved to remember their own girlhoods, becomes contagious, and the

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entire congregation is swept by an ecstasy of tears. The priest proclaims that the Holy Christ has descended, and particularly thanks the visitors, Madame Tellier and her staff.

After a boisterous trip back to their establishment, Madame and her ladies return to their ordinary evening labors, performed however with more than the routine zest and in high good spirits. "It isn't every day we have something to celebrate," Madame Tellier concludes the story by remarking, and only a joyless reader declines to celebrate with her. For once, at least, Schopenhauer's disciple has broken loose from gloomy reflections on the close relations between sex and death.

Exuberance in storytelling is hard to resist, and Maupassant never writes with more gusto than in "Madame Tellier's Establishment." This tale of Normandy has warmth, laughter, surprise, and even a kind of spiritual insight. The Pentecostal ecstasy that burns through the congregation is as authentic as the weeping of the whores that ignites it. Maupassant's irony is markedly kinder (though less subtle) than his master Flaubert's. And the story is bawdy, not prurient, in the Shakespearean spirit; it enlarges life, and diminishes no one.

Maupassant's own life ended badly; by his late twenties, he was syphilitic. At thirty-nine, the disease affected his mind, and he spent his final years locked in an asylum, after a suicide attempt. His most upsetting horror story, "The Horla," has a complex and ambiguous relation to his illness and its consequences. The nameless protagonist of the story is perhaps a syphilitic going mad, though nothing that Maupassant narrates actually tells us to make such an inference. A first-person narration, "The Horla" gives us more clues than we can interpret, because we cannot understand the narrator, and do not know whether we can trust his impressions, of which we receive little or no independent verification.

"The Horla" begins with the narrator—a prosperous young Norman gentleman—persuading us of his happiness on a beautiful May morning. He sees a splendid Brazilian three-master boat

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reader is wholly with her when she responds to his "I'd do anything for you" with "Would you please please please please please please please stop talking." Seven *please*s are a lot, but as repetition they are precise and persuasive in "Hills Like White Elephants." The story is beautifully prefigured in that simile of a title. Long and white, the hills across the valley of the Ebro "look like white elephants" to the woman, not to the man. White elephants, proverbial Siamese royal gifts to courtiers who would be ruined by the expense of their upkeep, become a larger metaphor for unwanted babies, and even more for erotic relationships too spiritually costly when a man is inadequate.

Hemingway's personal mystique—his bravura poses as warrior, big-game hunter, bullfighter, and boxer—is as irrelevant to "Hills Like White Elephants" as its male protagonist's insistence that "You know I love you." More relevant is the remark of Hemingway's surrogate, Nick Adams, in "The End of Something," when he terminates a relationship: "It isn't fun any more." I don't know many women readers who like that sentence, but it hardly is an apologia, only a very young man's self-indictment.

The Hemingway story that wounds me most is another five-pager, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," which is almost entirely dialogue, after its opening paragraphs, including an outrageous initial sentence:

> In those days the distances were all very different, the dirt blew off the hills that now have been cut down, and Kansas City was very like Constantinople.

You can parody that by saying: "In those days Bridgeport, Connecticut, was very like Haifa." Still, we are in Kansas City on Christmas Day, and listening to the conversation between two physicians: the incompetent Doctor Wilcox, who relies upon a limp, leather, indexed volume, *The Young Doctor's Friend and Guide,* and the mordant Doc Fischer, who begins by quoting his coreligionist Shylock: "What news along the Rialto?" The news is

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very bad, as we learn soon enough: a boy of about sixteen, obsessed with purity, had come into the hospital to ask for castration. Turned away, he had mutilated himself with a razor, and will probably die from loss of blood.

The interest of the story centers in Doc Fischer's lucid nihilism, prophetic of Nathanael West's Shrike in *Miss Lonelyhearts:*

> "Ride you, Doctor, on the day, the very anniversary, of our Savior's birth?"
>
> "*Our* Savior? Ain't you a Jew?" Doctor Wilcox said.
>
> "So I am. So I am. It always is slipping my mind. I've never given it its proper importance. So good of you to remind me. *Your* Savior. That's right. *Your* Savior, undoubtedly *your* Savior—and the ride for Palm Sunday."

"You, Wilcox, are the donkey upon whom I ride into Jerusalem" is the implication of that last phrase. Rancid and brilliant, Doc Fischer has peeked, as he says, into hell. His Shylockian intensity is a Hemingwayesque tribute to Shakespeare, described by Colonel Cantwell (Hemingway's surrogate) in *Across the River and into the Trees* as "the winner and still the undisputed champion." When he is most ambitious in his stories, Hemingway is most Shakespearean, as in the famous, quasi-autobiographical "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," its author's favorite. Of the story's protagonist, the failed writer Harry, Hemingway observes: "He had loved too much, demanded too much, and he wore it all out." That would be a superb critical remark to make about King Lear, Hemingway's most admired character in all of Shakespeare. More than anywhere else, Hemingway attempts and achieves tragedy in the relatively brief compass of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

The meditation of a dying man rather than the description of an action, this baroque story is Hemingway's most intense self-chastisement, and I think that Chekhov himself, much given to that mode, would have been impressed by it. One doesn't think of Hemingway as a visionary writer, but "The Snows of Kiliman-

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jaro" begins with an epigraph telling us that the snow-covered western summit of the mountain is called the House of God, and close to it is the carcass, dried and frozen, of a leopard. There is no explanation as to what a leopard could have been seeking nearly twenty thousand feet above sea level.

Very little is gained by saying that the leopard is a symbol of the dying Harry. Originally, in ancient Greek, a *simbolon* was a token for identification, that could be compared to a counterpart. Commonly, we use *symbol* more loosely, as something that stands for something else, whether by association or resemblance. If you identify the corpse of the leopard with Harry's lost but still residual ambition or aesthetic idealism as a writer, then you plunge Hemingway's story into bathos and grotesquerie. Hemingway himself did that in "The Old Man and the Sea," but not in the masterful "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

Harry is dying, slowly, of gangrene in an African hunting-camp, surrounded by vultures and hyenas, palpably unpleasant presences that need not be interpreted as symbolic. Neither need the leopard be so interpreted. Like Harry, it is out of place, but the writer's vision of Kilimanjaro does seem another of Hemingway's nostalgic visions of a lost spirituality, qualified as always by a keen sense of nothingness, a Shakespearean nihilism. It seems useful to regard the uncanny presence of the dead leopard as a strong irony, a forerunner of Harry's vain quest to recover his identity as a writer at Kilimanjaro, rather than say at Paris, Madrid, Key West, or Havana. The irony is at Hemingway's own expense, insofar as Harry prophesies the Hemingway who, nineteen days short of his sixty-second birthday, turned a double-barreled shotgun on himself in the mountains of Idaho. Yet the story is not primarily ironical, and need not be read as a personal prophecy. Harry is a failed Hemingway; Hemingway, by being able to compose "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," is precisely not a failure, at least as a writer.

The best moment in the story is hallucinatory, and comes just before the end. It is Harry's dying vision, though the reader can-

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not know that, until Harry's wife, Helen, realizes she can no longer hear him breathing. As he died, Harry dreamed that the rescue plane had come for him, but could carry only one passenger. On the visionary flight, Harry is taken up to see the square top of Kilimanjaro: "great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun." This apparent image of transcendence is the most illusive moment in the story; it represents death, and not the House of God. A dying man's phantasmagoria is not to be regarded as triumphal, when the entire story conveys Harry's conviction that he has wasted his gifts as a writer.

Yet Hemingway may have remembered King Lear's dying fantasy, in which the old, mad king is persuaded that his beloved daughter Cordelia breathes again, despite her murder. If you love too much, and demand too much, then you, like Lear and Harry (and, at last, Hemingway), will wear it all out. Fantasy, for Harry, takes the place of art.

Hemingway was so wonderful and unexpected a story-writer that I choose to end my account of him here with one of his unknown masterpieces, the splendidly ironic "A Sea Change," which prefigures his posthumously published novel *The Garden of Eden,* with its portrayal of ambiguous sexualities. In "A Sea Change" we are in a Parisian bar, where an archetypal Hemingwayesque couple are engaged in a crisp dialogue on infidelity. It takes the reader only a few exchanges to realize that the "sea change" of the title does not refer to the woman, who is determined to begin (or continue) a lesbian relationship, yet wishes also to return to the man. It is the man who is suffering a sea change, presumably into the writer who will compose the rich and strange *The Garden of Eden.*

"I'm a different man," he twice announces to the uncomprehending bartender, after the woman has left. Looking into the mirror, he *sees* the difference, but what he sees we are not told. Though he remarks to the bartender that "vice is a very strange thing," it cannot be a consciousness of "vice" that has made him a different man. Rather, it is his imaginative yielding to the woman's persua-

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sive defense that has altered him forever. "We're made up of all sorts of things. You've known that. You've used it well enough," she has said to him, and he tacitly acknowledges some crucial element in the sexuality they have shared. He suffers now a sea change, but nothing of him fades in this moment of only apparent loss. Almost too deft for irony, "A Sea Change" is a subtle self-recognition, an erotic autobiography remarkable for its indirection and its nuanced self-acceptance. Only the finest American master of the short story could have placed so much in so slight a sketch.

Flannery O'Connor

D. H. Lawrence, a superb writer of short stories, gave the reader a permanent wisdom in one brief remark: "Trust the tale, not the teller." That seems to me an essential principle in reading the stories of Flannery O'Connor, who may have been the most original tale-teller among Americans since Hemingway. Her sensibility was an extraordinary blend of Southern Gothic and severe Roman Catholicism. So fierce a moralist is O'Connor that readers need to be wary of her tendentiousness: she has too palpable a design upon us, to shock us by violence into a need for traditional faith. As teller, O'Connor was very shrewd, yet I think her best tales are far shrewder, and enforce no moral except an awakened moral imagination.

O'Connor's South is wildly Protestant, not the Protestantism of Europe, but of the indigenous American Religion, whether it calls itself Baptist, Pentecostal, or whatever. The prophets of that religion—"snakehandlers, Free Thinking Christians, Independent Prophets, the swindlers, the mad, and sometimes the genuinely inspired"—O'Connor named as "natural Catholics." Except for this handful of "natural Catholics," the people who throng O'Connor's marvelous stories are the damned, a category

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