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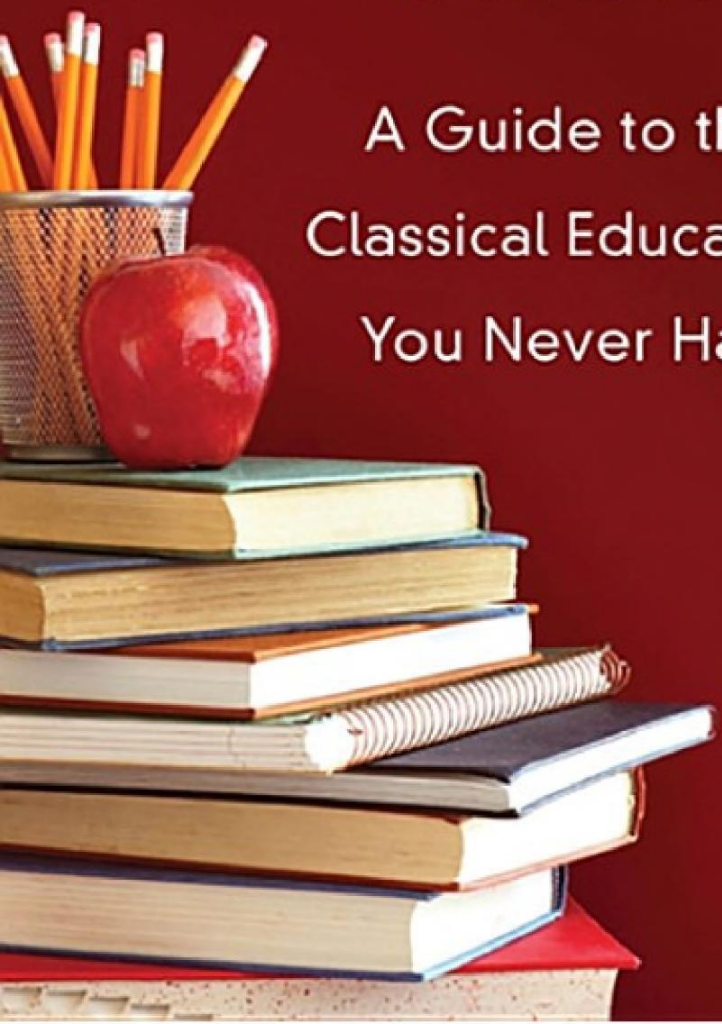
THE WELL-EDUCATED MIND

A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had



UPDATED AND EXPANDED

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PART

I

Beginning:

PREPARING FOR CLASSICAL EDUCATION

Chapter 1

Training Your Own Mind: The Classical Education You Never Had

> All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country. A Greek got his civilization by talking and looking, and in some measure a Parisian may still do it. But we, who live remote from history and monuments, we must read or we must barbarise.
>
> —WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS,
> *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

THE YEAR I turned thirty, I decided to go back to graduate school. I'd taken years off from school to write, teach literature as an adjunct lecturer, have four children. Now I was back in the classroom, on the wrong side of the teacher's desk. All the graduate students looked like teenagers. And graduate programs aren't designed for grownups; I was expected to stuff my family into the schedule designed for me by American Studies, live off a stipend of six thousand dollars per year while forgoing all other gainful employment, and content myself with university-sponsored health insurance, which supplied bare-bones coverage and classified anesthesia during childbirth as a frill. And I found myself dreading the coming year of classes. I'd been teaching and directing discussions for five years. I didn't think I could bear to be transformed back into a passive student, sitting and taking notes while a professor told me what I ought to know.

But to my relief, graduate seminars weren't lectures during which I meekly received someone else's wisdom. Instead, the three-hour weekly sessions turned out to be the springboard of a self-education process. Over the next year and a half, I was directed toward lists of books and given advice about how to read them. But I was expected to teach myself. I read book after book, summarized the content of each, and tried to see whether the arguments were flawed. Were the conclusions overstated? Drawn from skimpy evidence? Did the writers ignore facts, or distort them to support a point? Where did their theories break down? It was great fun; trashing the arguments of senior scholars who are making eighty times your annual stipend is one of the few compensations of grad-student serfdom.

All of this reading was preparation for my seminars, in which graduate students sat around long tables and argued loudly about the book of the week. The professor in charge pointed out our sloppy reasoning, corrected our misuses of language, and threw water on the occasional flames. These (more or less) Socratic dialogues built on the foundation of the reading I was doing at home. On evenings when I would normally have been watching *The X-Files* or scrubbing the toilet, I read my way through lists of required books with concentrated attention. The housework suffered and I missed Mulder's departure from spook hunting; but I found myself creating whole new structures of meaning in my mind, making connections between theories and building new theories of my own on top of the links. I wrote better, thought more clearly, read more.

I also drove myself into work-induced psychosis. I stayed up late at night to finish my papers and got up early with the baby; I wrote my dissertation proposal on the living room floor, with a Thomas the Tank Engine track in construction all around

me; I spent the night before my required French exam washing my four-year-old's sheets and pillows after he caught the stomach flu; I sat through numerous required workshops in which *nothing* of value was said.

Here is the good news: You don't have to suffer through the graduate school wringer in order to train your mind—unless you plan to get a job in university teaching (not a particularly strong employment prospect anyway). For centuries, women and men undertook this sort of learning—reading, taking notes, discussing books and ideas with friends—without subjecting themselves to graduate-school stipends and university health-insurance policies.

Indeed, university lectures were seen by Thomas Jefferson as unnecessary for the serious pursuit of historical reading. In 1786, Jefferson wrote to his college-age nephew Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., advising him to pursue the larger part of his education independently. Go ahead and attend a course of lectures in science, Jefferson recommended. But he then added, "While you are attending these courses, you can proceed by yourself in a regular series of historical reading. It would be a waste of time to attend a professor of this. It is to be acquired from books, and if you pursue it by yourself, you can accommodate it to your other reading so as to fill up those chasms of time not otherwise appropriated."[1]

Professional historians might take umbrage at their apparent superfluity, but Jefferson's letter reflects a common understanding of the times: Any literate man (or woman, we would add) can rely on self-education to train and fill the mind. All you need are a shelf full of books, a congenial friend or two who can talk to you about your reading, and a few "chasms of time not otherwise appropriated." (Contemporary critics of university education might add that a Ph.D. doesn't necessarily train and fill the mind in any case; this, sniffs Harold Bloom, is a "largely forgotten function of a university education," since universities now "disdain to fulfill" our yearning for the classics.)[2]

Young Randolph was able to build on the foundation of a privileged education. But his home course in self-improvement was followed by many Americans who were less well schooled—including thousands of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women, who were usually given much less classroom education than their male counterparts. Limited to the learning they could acquire for themselves once a brief period of formal education had ended, American women of the last two centuries kept journals and commonplace books chronicling their reading, met with each other, and took responsibility for developing their own minds. The etiquette author Eliza Farrar advised her young female readers not only on manners and dress, but also on intellectual cultivation: "Self-education begins where school education ends," she wrote sternly.[3]

Many, many women took this advice seriously. Mary Wilson Gilchrist, a Civil War–era Ohioan who lived at home until her sudden death at the age of 24, could boast only of a single year at Ohio Female College, where she briefly studied trigonometry, English literature, French, music, logic, rhetoric, and theology—hardly time enough to gain even an elementary understanding of this laundry list of subjects, let alone mastery of their principles. But Gilchrist's education didn't cease when she returned home. She kept in her diary a list of the books she read: Charlotte Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, Henry Fielding, William Wordsworth, Virgil, Sophocles, and David Hume ("Difficult," she wrote of Hume, hoping that she would "retain some of it"). To keep herself motivated, she set up a reading club with a neighbor. "Mary Carpenter called," one diary entry reads, "and we made arrangements for reading Shakespeare together."[4] Southern teenager Hope Summerell Chamberlain wrote in her own journal of reading Humboldt's *Kosmos*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, and Guizot's *History of Civilization*, among other difficult books; the reading club she helped to organize was, in her own words, "a peace offering to a hungry mind."[5]

What if your mind is hungry, but you feel unprepared, under-educated, intimidated by all those books you know you *should* have read?

"Acquaint yourself with your own ignorance," Isaac Watts advised his readers, in his self-education treatise *Improvement of the Mind* (originally published in 1741). "Impress your mind with a deep and painful sense of the low and imperfect degrees of your present knowledge." This cheerful admonition was intended as a reassurance, not a condemnation: A well-trained mind is the result of application, not inborn genius. Deep thinkers, Watts assures us, are not those born with "bright genius, a ready wit, and good parts" (a relief for most of us). No matter how ignorant and "low" a mind might be, "studious thought . . . the exercise of your own reason and judgment upon all you read . . . gives good sense . . . and affords your understanding the truest improvement."

Today, as in Watts's own time, many intelligent and ambitious adults feel inadequate to tackle any course of serious reading. They struggle to overcome an indifferent education that didn't teach the basic skills needed for mature reading and writing. But Watts's admonition is still true: No matter how incomplete your education, you can learn how to read intelligently, think about your reading, and talk to a friend about what you've discovered. You can educate yourself.

Sustained, serious reading is at the center of this self-education project. Observation, reading, conversation, and attendance at lectures are all ways of self-teaching, as Isaac Watts goes on to tell us. But he concludes that reading is the most important method of self-improvement. Observation limits our learning to our immediate surroundings; conversation and attendance at lectures are valuable, but expose us only to the views of a few nearby persons. Reading alone allows us to reach out beyond the restrictions of time and space, to take part in what Mortimer Adler has called the "Great Conversation" of ideas that began in ancient times and has continued unbroken to the present. Reading makes us part of this Great Conversation, no matter where and when we pursue it.

But sustained and serious reading has always been a difficult project—even before the advent of television. Much has been written about our present move away from texts, toward an image-based, visual culture: Schools no longer teach reading and writing properly. Television, movies, and now the Web have decreased the importance of the written word. We are moving into a postliterate age. Print culture is doomed. Alas.

I dislike these sorts of apocalyptic reflections. Streamed entertainment may be pernicious, but reading is no harder (or easier) than it has ever been. "Our post-revolutionary youth," complained Thomas Jefferson in an 1814 letter to John Adams, "are born under happier stars than you and I were. They acquire all learning in their mother's womb, and bring it into the world ready-made. The information of books is no longer necessary; and all knowledge which is not innate, is in contempt, or neglect at least." Jefferson's moan over the stage of modern intellectual culture laments the rise of a philosophy that exalts self-expression over reading. Even before the advent of television, reading that required concentration was a difficult and neglected activity.

In fact, reading is a discipline: like running regularly, or meditating, or taking voice lessons. Any able adult can run across the backyard, but this ability to put one foot in front of another shouldn't make him think that he can tackle a marathon without serious, time-consuming training. Most of us can manage to sing "Happy Birthday" or the Doxology when called for, but this doesn't incline us to march down to the local performing arts center and try out for the lead in *Aida*.

Yet because we can read the newspaper or *Time* or Stephen King without difficulty, we tend to think that we should be able to go directly into Homer or Henry James without any further preparation. And when we stumble, grow confused or weary, we take this as proof of our mental inadequacy: We'll never be able to read the Great Books.

The truth is that the study of literature requires different *skills* than reading for

pleasure. The inability to tackle, unaided, a list of Great Books and stick to the project doesn't demonstrate mental inadequacy—just a lack of preparation. As Richard J. Foster eloquently argues in *Celebration of Discipline*, we tend to think (erroneously) that anyone who can read ought to be able to study ideas. "To convince people that they must learn to study is the major obstacle," Foster writes. "Most people assume that because they know how to read words they know how to study." But the opposite is true:

> Studying a book is an extremely complex matter, especially for the novice. As with tennis or typing, when we are first learning it seems that there are a thousand details to master and we wonder how on earth we will keep everything in mind at the same time. Once we reach proficiency, however, the mechanics become second nature, and we are able to concentrate on our tennis game or the material to be typed. The same is true with studying a book. Study is an exacting art involving a labyrinth of details.[6]

Secondary schools don't typically train us how to read seriously, how to *study*. Their task is to produce students who are reading at the so-called tenth-grade level, a fluency that allows readers to absorb newspapers and Stephen King with ease. A university education ought to follow up on this basic literacy by teaching its freshmen how to read seriously, but many college seniors aren't much further along than their high school counterparts. Often, they graduate with a nagging sense of their own deficiencies; as adults, they come back to the task of serious reading and discover that it has not magically become simpler. Homer is still long-winded, Plato still impenetrable, Stoppard still bewilderingly random. Too often, these readers give up, convinced that serious books are beyond them.

But all that's missing is training in the art of reading. If you didn't learn how to read properly in school, you can do it now. The methods of classical education are at your disposal.

The world is full of self-improvement methods. What's distinctive about classical education?

"Some books are to be tasted," wrote the sixteenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon, "others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Bacon, who had a knack for the quotable (he is also responsible for "The remedy is worse than the disease" and "Knowledge is power"), was suggesting that not every book is worthy of serious attention. But the three levels of understanding he describes—tasting, swallowing, and digesting—reflect his familiarity with classical education. In the classical school, learning is a three-part process. First, taste: Gain basic knowledge of your subject. Second, swallow: Take the knowledge into your own understanding by evaluating it. Is it valid? Is it true? Why? Third, digest: Fold the subject into your own understanding. Let it change the way you think—or reject it as unworthy. Taste, swallow, digest; find out the facts, evaluate them, form your own opinion.

Like Bacon, the classical schoolmaster divides learning into three stages, generally known as the *trivium*. The first stage of education is called the *grammar* stage (in this case, "grammar" means the building blocks, the foundational knowledge of each academic subject). In elementary school, children are asked to absorb information—not to evaluate it, but simply to learn it. Memorization and repetition are the primary methods of teaching; children are expected to become familiar with a certain body of knowledge, but they aren't yet asked to analyze it. Critical thinking comes into play during the second stage of education, the *logic* (or "dialectic") stage. Once a foundation of information is laid, students begin to exercise their analytical skills; they decide whether information is correct or incorrect, and make connections between cause and effect, historical events, scientific phenomena, words and their meanings. In the final stage of secondary education, the *rhetoric* stage, students learn to express their own opinions about the facts they have accumulated and evaluated. So the final years of education focus on elegant, articulate expression of opinion in

speech and writing—the study of rhetoric.[7]

Classically educated students know that this pattern (learn facts; analyze them; express your opinions about them) applies to all later learning. But if you haven't been classically educated, you may not recognize that these three separate steps also apply to reading. It is impossible to analyze on a first reading; you have to grasp a book's central ideas *before* you can evaluate them. And after you've evaluated—asking, "Are the ideas presented accurately? Are the conclusions valid?"—you can ask the final set of questions: What do you think about these ideas? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Classrooms too often skip the first two steps and progress directly to the third, which is why so many elementary texts insist on asking six-year-olds how they feel about what they're learning, long before they've properly had a chance to learn it. This mental short cut has become a habit for many adults, who are ready to give their opinions long before they've had a chance to understand the topic under study. (Listen to any call-in radio show.) And the habit of leaping directly to the rhetoric stage can prevent even mature minds from learning how to read properly. The density of ideas in Plato or Shakespeare or Thomas Hardy frustrates the mind that comes to them ready to draw conclusions. To tackle a course of reading successfully, we have to retrain our minds to grasp new ideas by first understanding them, then evaluating them, and finally forming our own opinions.

Like badly taught six-year-olds, we are too quick to go straight to opinion making without the intermediate steps of understanding and evaluation. The British mystery writer Dorothy L. Sayers, proposing a return to classical education for the twentieth century, lamented the loss of the classical "tools of learning" in a speech at Oxford:

> Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that today, when the proportion of literacy is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass propaganda to an extent hitherto unheard of and unimagined? . . . Have you ever, in listening to a debate among adult and presumably responsible people, been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side? . . . And when you think of this, and think that most of our public affairs are settled by debates and committees, have you ever felt a certain sinking of the heart? . . . Is not the great defect of our education today—a defect traceable through all the disquieting symptoms of trouble that I have mentioned—that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils "subjects," we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning?[8]

Grammar, logic, and rhetoric train the mind in the art of learning. But if you never learned how to grasp knowledge quickly and well, to evaluate the validity of arguments, and to present your own opinions with grace and clarity, it isn't too late. You can still learn how to understand, evaluate, and argue with ideas. Like a medieval tutor with a single promising pupil, this book will walk you through each stage of classical education, so that you will have the tools to find the serious contemplation of books a delight rather than a frustration.

How to begin?

Self-educated men and women of the past offer us a few general principles as we start on the project of training our own minds. "Engage not the mind in the intense pursuit of too many things at once," Isaac Watts advises, "especially such as have no relation to one another. This will be ready to distract the understanding, and hinder it from attaining perfection in any one subject of study." It may seem slow, but study one subject at a time. Begin with this book, which will guide you through the necessary skills of reading and analysis; make this study your sole subject until you've completed it. Once you have learned how to progress through the steps of understanding (grammar), evaluating (logic), and expressing an opinion (rhetoric), *then* turn to the reading lists in Part II. These lists are organized by subject; if you read the books in order, limiting yourself to one field of inquiry (fiction,

autobiography, history) at a time, you will find that your earlier reading will set a framework for the books that come later, while your later reading will reinforce and clarify what has come before.

Stick to one list at a time. During this self-study time, avoid the kind of reading that German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher indulged in during his early years: a wide-ranging and impressive, but unsystematic, devouring of books that left his mind, as he put it in later years, "like Chaos, before the world was created."

Jefferson (always full of advice on every subject) counseled his young nephew to organize this systematic reading around chronology: "Having laid down your plan [of reading]," he tells young Randolph, "the order of time will be your sufficient guide."[9] In other words, read books in the order in which they were written. The nineteenth-century educator Lydia Sigourney agreed; in her *Letters to Young Ladies*, she recommended that reading always be done with the help of a "table of chronology . . . It is a good practice to fix in the memory some important eras—the subversion of an empire, for instance—and then ascertain what events were taking place in all other nations, at the same period of time. A few of these parallels, running through the History of the World, will collect rich clusters of knowledge, and arrange them in the conservatory of the mind."[10] The book lists I include are arranged in chronological order for this very reason; it is easier to understand a subject if you begin with its foundational works, and then read systematically through those books that build, one layer at a time, on this foundation.

When to read?

Lydia Sigourney warned her "young ladies" that systematic reading is "peculiarly necessary" to women "because, dwelling much on the contemplation of little things, [we] are in danger of losing the intellectual appetite."[11] Let's be egalitarian: This is equally true of men. We all juggle multiple jobs, housework, bill paying, paperwork, children and family, and dozens of smaller distractions: meals, groceries, email, the ever-present lure of late-night television. The struggle to keep to a self-imposed schedule of reading is often lost in those moments after dinner when the children are in bed, the dishes done, and we think: *I've been working all day. I just need to vegetate for a few minutes before I try to use my brain.* And three hours later we've watched an hour of TV, signed on to check what emails might have come in since lunch, glanced at a couple of favorite Web sites, put in a load of laundry, and wiped off the kitchen sink.

While avoiding apocalyptic pronouncements on the decadence of modern society, I would still suggest that the biggest difference between modern media and the long-enduring book is the way in which TV and the Internet manage to infiltrate themselves into spare moments and promptly swallow up those "chasms of time." I can't say that I've ever lost myself in Plato and looked up an hour and half later to find that the time I intended to devote to answering my email has suddenly disappeared, but I have often spent the time that I meant to dedicate to reading sorting through email spam, checking out links, and (even worse) playing Spider Solitaire on my computer. ("Just one game," I'll think, "to warm up my brain.")

High language about the life of the mind has to yield, at some point, to practical plans for self-cultivation. The mastery of grammar, writing, logic, analysis, and argumentation—all of which I'll cover in chapters to come—depends on the single uncomplicated act of carving out a space within which they can exist. The first task of self-education is not the reading of Plato, but the finding of thirty minutes in which you can devote yourself to thought, rather than to activity.

THE FIRST STEP: SCHEDULE REGULAR READING AND SELF-STUDY TIME

Your first task in self-education is simple: *Set a time for self-education.*

Remember these principles:

Morning is better than evening. "There are portions of the day too when the mind should be eased," Thomas Jefferson wrote to his nephew Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr. "Particularly after dinner it should be applied to lighter occupations." Late evening is far from ideal for the project of reading seriously. It is usually far better to spend thirty minutes reading before breakfast than to devote two hours to it in the evening. As the autodidact Benjamin Franklin famously suggested, early to bed and early to rise is the most effective path to wisdom. (The jury remains out on health and wealth.)

Start short. The brain is an organ, and mental exercise, like physical exercise, has to be introduced gradually. Don't leap ambitiously into a schedule that has you rising at five to spend two hours in reading; you're likely to skip it altogether. Start with half an hour of reading first thing in the morning, and develop the habit of sticking to this shorter time of concentration and thought before extending it. And even if you never extend it, you're still doing more reading than you were before you began the project of self-cultivation.

Don't schedule yourself for study every day of the week. The body begins to drag if exercised every day without a break. Aim for four days per week; this makes it possible to establish a habit of reading while giving yourself the weekend "off" and a "flex morning" for the days when you're still catching up with the previous week's paperwork, the plumber arrives at daybreak, the car battery dies, and the toddler develops stomach flu.

Never check your email right before you start reading. I thought this was a personal problem until I ran across several essays in a row—from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, our local newspaper, and several other equally varied publications—about the distracting qualities of email. There is something in the format of email (its terseness? the sheer volume of messages? its tendency to reward skimming over deep reading?) that pulls the mind away from the contemplative, relaxed frame so important for good reading. If you get good news, you're distracted by it; if someone writes you a nasty note, you'll spend the next forty-five minutes mentally formulating blistering replies rather than concentrating on your book. If no one writes at all, you'll be depressed because you've suddenly become invisible in cyberspace.

Guard your reading time. We do those things which are rewarding to us, and immediate gratification always seems more rewarding than slow progress toward a long-term goal. We live in a world that applauds visible achievement; it will almost always be more satisfying to *do* something (cleaning the garage, clearing out your email box, checking tasks off your to-do list) than to *think*. The clean garage, the empty email box, the completed list: all of these testify to your productiveness, while reading yields no apparent gain. (All you've done is sit still for half an hour and move your eyes, after all.)

The project of self-education will bring your own sense of what is truly worthwhile into sharp relief. Forced to choose between a chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and some more immediately rewarding task, you will come face to face with your deepest values: What do you prize more, a temporary visible accomplishment or the beginnings of a deeper understanding of racial tensions in the United States? A finished to-do list, or a teaspoonful of wisdom?

This is not a small question. The world that applauds visible achievement is giving you a very strong message about why *you* are worthwhile. When you choose to think, rather than do, you are rejecting production in favor of reflection; you are pushing back against a system that wants to locate your worth as a human being in your ability to turn out a commodity. Reading, rather than working, is a small but meaningful dissent.

So resist other satisfactions or duties that encroach on your reading time.

Take the first step now. On your calendar or day timer, schedule four weekly reading periods of half an hour each now. Next week, use this time period to read Chapter 2 and complete the *Second Step* assignment.

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[1]Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., in Paris, dated August 27, 1786. This letter is in the University of Virginia Library, where it is titled "Education of a Future Son-in-Law," and is archived online at http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefLett.html.

[2]Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 24.

[3]Eliza W. R. Farrar, *The Young Lady's Friend, by a Lady* (Boston: American Stationer's Company, 1836), p. 4.

[4]Mary Gilchrist's diary is quoted in Claudia Lynn Lady, "Five Tri-State Women During the Civil War: Day-to-Day Life," *West Virginia History*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 189–226. Gilchrist's diary is excerpted on pp. 212–14.

[5]"What's Done and Past," unpublished autobiography, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University.

[6]Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), p. 67.

[7]A proposal for K–12 education following this pattern is described in detail in Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

[8]Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning," a speech presented at Oxford University in 1947, reprinted by the *National Review*, 215 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

[9]Jefferson, "Education of a Future Son-in-Law."

[10]Lydia Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies*, 5th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1839), p. 138.

[11]Ibid., p. 133.

Chapter 2

Wrestling with Books: The Act of Reading

> And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.
>
> —GENESIS 32:24

THE FUTURISTS HAVE long been declaring it: We are a postliterate culture. Books are outdated forms of communication. Soon the flood of information that is now contained in print will all be presented in multimedia formats.

This prediction is only tangentially related to serious *reading*. Gathering data, which is what you do when you skim news headlines, read *People* at the doctor's office, or use a book on plumbing techniques to fix your sink, has already shifted away from print, toward other media. But gathering data and *reading*—understanding ideas and how people act when they try to live by those ideas—are not the same.

When you gather data from a website or book, you use the same mechanical skill as when you engage in serious reading. Your eyes move; the words convey meaning to your mind. Yet your mind itself functions in a different way. When you gather data, you become informed. When you *read*, you develop wisdom—or, in Mortimer Adler's words, "become enlightened." "To be informed," Adler writes in *How to Read a Book*, "is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what it is all about." To be informed is to collect facts; to be enlightened is to understand an idea (justice, or charity, or human freedom) and use it to make sense of the facts you've gathered.

When you read the morning news, you may find out that a suicide bomber has just devastated a Gaza marketplace. This is information—a collection of facts. Whether you gather those facts from an online news site, a print source, or CNN's *Headline News* morning show does not significantly change the information, although the medium may slightly alter your experience of it; a skillful montage of bloody survivors, or a website with links to earlier news reports, may arouse your emotions, or associate this particular bombing with others that have happened recently.

But in order to be *enlightened* about the bombing, you must *read seriously*: history, theology, politics, propaganda, editorials. The ideas that impel suicide bombers cannot be gleaned from brief news reports or interactive media. The causes of such desperate actions cannot be made clear to you through a picture and a moving headline while you eat your toast. These things must be expressed with precise and evocative words, assembled into complex, difficult sentences. To be enlightened—to be wise—you must wrestle with these sentences. Technology can do a great deal to make information gathering easier, but it can do little to simplify the gathering of wisdom. Information washes over us like a sea, and recedes without leaving its traces behind. Wrestling with truth, as the story of Jacob warns us, is a time-consuming process that marks us forever.[1]

But I read so slowly; it will take me forever to get through those lists of Great Books! Reading is a lifelong process. There's no hurry, no semester schedule, no end-of-term panic, no final exam. The idea that fast reading is good reading is a twentieth-century weed, springing out of the stony farmland cultivated by the computer manufacturers. As Kirkpatrick Sale has eloquently pointed out, every technology has

its own internal ethical system. Steam technology made size a virtue. In the computerized world, faster is better, and speed is the highest virtue of all.[2] When there is a flood of knowledge to be assimilated, the conduits had better flow fast.

But the pursuit of knowledge is centered around a different ethic. The serious reader is not attempting to assimilate a huge quantity of information as quickly as possible, but to understand a few many-sided and elusive ideas. The speed ethic shouldn't be transplanted into an endeavor that is governed by very different ideals.

Speed-reading techniques are not likely to be of enormous help to you in any case. They center around two primary skills: proper eye movement (keep your eyes moving forward, and learn how to sweep them across the page diagonally rather than reading each line individually) and recognition of important words (look for concrete nouns and verbs, and allow your eye to move more quickly over "filler" words in a sentence). Peter Kump, the one-time director of education for the grandmama of all speed-reading courses, Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics, offers would-be speed-readers the following principles:

> Rule One: The more abstract words a passage contains, the harder it is to read quickly.
> Rule Two: The fewer ideas a passage contains, the easier it is to read fast.
> Rule Three: The more prior knowledge of the subject of a written passage the reader has, the easier it is to read fast.[3]

How does Aristotle (here, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, grading the severity of human misconduct) do on this scale?

> [T]here are three kinds of injury. Those that are done in ignorance are Mistakes—when the patient or the act or the instrument or the effect was different from what the agent supposed, because he either did not mean to hit anyone, or not with that missile, or not that person, or not with that effect; but the result was different from what he expected (e.g. he only meant to give the other a prick, not a wound), or the person or the missile was different. When the injury occurs contrary to reasonable expectation it is a Misadventure; but when it occurs not contrary to reasonable expectation but without malicious intent it is a mistake (for the agent makes a mistake when the origin of the responsibility lies in himself; when it lies outside him his act is a misadventure). When the agent acts knowingly but without premeditation it is an Injury; such are all acts due to temper or any other of the unavoidable and natural feelings to which human beings are liable. For those who commit these injuries and mistakes are doing wrong, and their acts are injuries; but this does not of itself make them unjust or wicked men, because the harm that they did was not due to malice; it is when a man does a wrong on purpose that he is unjust and wicked.[4]

This is not a difficult passage to *understand* (although, granted, it lacks a certain snappy appeal; this particular classic is *not* on your reading list). Aristotle is defining the limits of what we might today call "misdemeanors" or "minor crimes" (he cautions the reader that he is not here discussing deliberate evil or purposeful wrongdoing). Perhaps you've broken your neighbor's nose. Assuming you didn't carefully plan the breaking and lie in wait for him, there are three possibilities. You made a Mistake: You took a light swing at your neighbor, just to scare him, but misjudged your own strength and hit him harder than intended (this is a Mistake because the problem lay inside you, in your poor understanding of your own strength). Or perhaps the nose got broken through Misadventure: You intended to hit your neighbor lightly, but he unfortunately tripped just as you were swinging and fell into your fist. (Alas.) Now the real cause of the broken nose is something outside you (the neighbor's stumble). Or you might have committed an Injury: Your neighbor infuriated you, you hauled off and broke his nose in a fit of temper, but once you cooled down you were heartily ashamed of yourself, made amends, and swore never to do such a thing again.

This is an interesting sort of puzzle: If we take it out of the testosterone-charged

nose-punching realm and apply it to something academic, like plagiarism, how do we evaluate the student who copies deliberately? unintentionally? out of desperation? On the weightier side: It is also the foundation of much Western law governing the severity of various offenses. Our distinction between murder and manslaughter hinges on whether the death can be classified as Mistake, Misadventure, or Injury (in which case it may be manslaughter), or whether it lies in the realm of deliberate, purposeful wrongdoing.

Could you speed-read this passage?

No; Peter Kump's principles will be of no help to you. The passage has at least four separate ideas in it, not to mention a whole slew of abstract words *(reasonable expectation, malicious intent, premeditation, unavoidable and natural feelings, wicked, wrong)*. And unless you're a lawyer, you probably have no prior familiarity with the classification of injuries.

Generally, fiction is easier to read quickly than nonfiction. Even so, speed-reading fiction works just fine when the plot is the thing (James Patterson, say, or Janet Evanovich) but can cheat you out of understanding character-based fiction. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen introduces two of her male romantic leads like this:

> Mr Bingley was good looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners. His sisters were fine women, with an air of decided fashion. His brother-in-law, Mr Hurst, merely looked the gentleman; but his friend Mr Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.[5]

Austen's prose isn't as loaded with abstractions as Aristotle's, but nevertheless Austen introduces two quite separate ideas in this single paragraph: that a man's fortune makes him handsomer to the onlooker, and that manners (themselves a separate idea, defined elsewhere) are even more important than money.

Speed-reading techniques are most useful when pure information is offered, as in (for example) an article from a 2001 *People* magazine, marveling over the actress Jenna Elfman's deceptive youthfulness at the advanced age of twenty-nine:

> As she approaches 30, Elfman has found her comfort zone. Her show *Dharma & Greg* is a hit. She and husband Bodhi, 32, have been happily married for six years. And the 5'10" Elfman likes what she sees when she looks in the mirror. "If you're feeling good about your marriage and career, you're going to look okay," she has said. Elfman definitely does. "She enjoys her life," says her makeup artist Ann Masterson. "She's very secure with who she is." . . . To keep her body toned, Elfman takes ballet lessons at her home three times a week, studies yoga, drinks about 100 oz. of water a day, gets plenty of sleep, and tries to avoid sugar. And if she's sweating getting older, she isn't showing it. "I don't think it matters to her," says . . . director Peter Chesholm. "She still has such a great child within her."[6]

There might (debatably) be an idea (sort of) in that last line, but apart from this the passage is loaded with concrete nouns and verbs (and measurements). It certainly isn't necessary for you to read every line from beginning to end, and if you glance over it and identify the main words—*30, comfort zone, Dharma and Greg, hit, husband, happily married, mirror, body toned*—you can grasp the passage's import without bothering with the little words.

But in Aristotle and Austen, the little words are *important*. "This does not of itself make them unjust or wicked men, because the harm that they did was not due to malice": Without "of itself" and "due to," the sentence loses its exact meaning.

Three insights offered by the speed-reading experts may be of some use to you. First: The average reader doesn't simply move her eyes from left to right across the page. She continually glances back at what she's already read, and then skips her eyes forward again to find her place. Sometimes this is an important part of understanding; in reading the passage from Aristotle's *Ethics*, you might find yourself glancing back at the definition of Mistake as you read about Misadventure, in order to keep the difference clear in your mind. But often this compulsive backtracking becomes a bad habit that slows you down unnecessarily. Putting your finger on the page and moving it as you read can help you become conscious of whether you've formed this habit; try it first with simple prose, and see whether your eyes tend to leap backward and forward away from the point marked by your finger.

Second: When reading a difficult passage, you may find it helpful to make an initial sweep with your eyes over a paragraph, looking for concrete nouns, action verbs, and capitalized letters, before settling down to read it from beginning to end. When scanning a paragraph in this way, try to follow a Z-shaped pattern down and across the page. A scan of the passage from the *Ethics* would give you the words *Mistake, Misadventure,* and *Injury* (which, in the Penguin edition, are capitalized); the words *ignorance, malicious, premeditation,* and *feelings* might also stand out to your eye. Even before reading, then, you know that Aristotle will be distinguishing three kinds of errors, and that human intention will have something to do with the classification. Now your "slow reading" of the passage will probably be a little more effective.

Third: Peter Kump's Rule Three ("The more prior knowledge of the subject of a written passage the reader has, the easier it is to read fast") should encourage you: serious reading, difficult at the beginning, gets easier and easier. The lists in this book are organized chronologically and by subject, so that whether you choose History or Poetry, you'll begin with the earliest works on the subject. These are likely to be the most difficult because you're not familiar with the conventions of the field, with its peculiar vocabulary, the structure of its arguments, the information it takes for granted. (And neither was anyone else, when those foundational works were written.) But as you continue to read books in the same field, you'll find the same arguments, the same vocabulary, the same preoccupations, again and again. Each time you'll move through them more quickly and with more assurance. You will read faster and with greater retention—not because of a mechanical trick, but because you are educating your mind.

THE SECOND STEP: PRACTICE THE MECHANICS OF READING

If you have difficulty with the actual act of reading, you may need to do some remedial skill work before tackling the *Iliad*. Try this diagnostic test: Glance at your watch's second hand, note the time, and then read the passage below at your normal speed.

> Books which we have first read in odd places always retain their charm, whether read or neglected. Thus Hazlitt always remembered that it was on the 10th of April, 1798, that he "sat down to a volume of the *New Eloise* at the Inn of Llangollen over a bottle of sherry and a cold chicken." In the same way I remember how Professor Longfellow in college recommended to us, for forming a good French style, to read Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin*; and yet it was a dozen years later before I found it in a country inn, on a lecture trip and sat up half the night to read it. It may be, on the other hand, that such haphazard meetings with books sometimes present them under conditions hopelessly unfavorable, as when I encountered Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for the first time on my first voyage in an Azorian barque; and it inspires to this day a slight sense of nausea, which it might, after all, have inspired equally on land.[7]

Look again at your watch. How long did it take you to read this passage? Count the unfamiliar words in this passage. How many did you find? If you don't know

what a *barque* is, can you figure it out from context?

What is Higginson's point?

If it took you a minute or less to read this passage, you are already reading at an appropriate speed for serious prose. If you found no more than ten unfamiliar words in this passage, your vocabulary is already at the so-called tenth-grade literacy level, which means that you are technically capable of reading anything that's written for an intelligent layperson. If you guessed that a barque is a kind of boat, you know how to gather clues for unfamiliar vocabulary words from context. And if you managed to figure out (unfamiliar proper names notwithstanding) that Higginson thinks that the conditions under which you first read a book are likely to affect the way you remember that book thereafter, you know how to grasp the main idea of a paragraph.

If it took you more than a minute to read this brief passage, and you found more than ten unfamiliar words, you would do well to review your actual mechanical reading skills (see below). Otherwise, you don't need to do any remedial work.

Did it take you more than one minute to read the diagnostic passage? Extremely slow readers may be victims of poor early teaching. If you were taught to read by pure word-recognition methods (in which children learn each individual word by sight, rather than being taught how to "sound out" the word by pronouncing each letter or combination of letters), you may be recognizing the shape of each word as you read.[8] Although many readers are able to do this fairly quickly, others can't. And since "sight reading" depends on repeated exposure to a word before you can reliably recognize and remember it, "sight readers" can have great difficulty with more complex reading that contains a number of unfamiliar words. If you are both a slow reader and a poor speller, you're probably guessing at the meanings of words from their shapes, rather than truly recognizing and understanding them; you're unable to spell because you have no memory of the letters in each word (instead you're just guessing at the word's meaning because of its shape). You may be able to improve your reading speed by working through a remedial phonics text such as *Phonics Pathways*, which will retrain you to read words from left to right, decoding them by sounding them out. This will allow you to recognize unfamiliar words more quickly (and will probably improve your spelling as well). Use the first fifteen minutes of your scheduled reading time each day to work on remedial phonics skills until you finish the book.

Did you find the vocabulary of the passage overwhelming? A vocabulary-building course will increase your mental store of words and will speed up your reading, since you won't have to pause as often to puzzle over unfamiliar words. *Wordly Wise 3000* (published by the respected educational press Educators Publishing Service) covers over three thousand frequently occurring words, chosen to bring your vocabulary up to twelfth-grade level. Each lesson contains fifteen words, along with exercises aimed to help you use words correctly in context. The series begins at primary level and goes through high school. Most adult readers should probably start with Book 6, although you could back up to Book 5 if you feel truly ill prepared. There is a shift in difficulty between Books 5 and 6; the analogies become more difficult, and the reading exercises much more complex.

The *Vocabulary from Classical Roots* series, also from Educators Publishing Service, is a good follow-up to *Wordly Wise*. As a matter of fact, many readers (not just those doing remedial work) may find this series helpful in preparing to read classic literature. Each lesson gives several Greek or Latin roots, lists of familiar words using those roots, and lists of unfamiliar words along with exercises in proper use. The five books in the series (A, B, C, D, and E) are all on the same level of difficulty, but they progress from the most familiar roots to those less frequently used. In Book A, for example, you'll get *duo*, the Latin root meaning "two," along with *duplicity* and *duplicate*; in Book E, you'll get *umbra*, the Latin for "shade, shadow," along with the vocabulary words *umbrage* and *adumbrate*.

As with remedial phonics, use the first fifteen minutes of your scheduled reading time each day to work on these vocabulary skills.

Do you want to improve your reading speed? Read the first section of Chapter 3 and practice moving your finger from left to right. Do your eyes tend to jump backward from your finger, even when you understand what you've already read? If so, you should spend several weeks using your finger to read, in order to retrain your eyes to move forward. Remember that it's always fine to look back for *content*—but you don't want your eyes to skip backward out of habit.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Dolores G. Hiskes, *Phonics Pathways: Clear Steps to Easy Reading and Perfect Spelling*, 10th ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

Kenneth Hodkinson, Sandra Adams, and Cheryl Dressler, *Wordly Wise 3000: Systematic Academic Vocabulary Development*, 3rd ed. (Educators Publishing Service, 2012). Books 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Norma Fifer, Nancy Flowers, and Lee Mountain, *Vocabulary from Classical Roots*, 3rd ed. (Educators Publishing Service, 1998). Books A, B, C, D, and E.

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[1]Genesis 32: Jacob, wandering along the banks of the Jabbok river in the dark and dreading the prospect of meeting on the next morning his estranged brother Esau (not to mention all of Esau's well-armed followers), meets a man and wrestles with him there until morning. When day breaks, the man touches Jacob's hip and throws it out of joint, leaving him with a limp. Although the mysterious stranger is never unambiguously identified, he gives Jacob a new name—Israel—just as God renamed Abram, earlier in the book; and Jacob himself says, "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (As with all great literature, it's best to read the original rather than depend on my summary.)

[2]Kirkpatrick Sale, *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution: Lessons for the Computer Age* (New York: Perseus, 1996).

[3]Peter Kump, *Break-Through Rapid Reading* (Paramus, N.J.: Prentice Hall Press, 1998), pp. 212–13.

[4]Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, rev. Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin, 1976), pp. 192–93.

[5]Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, chapter 4.

[6]Susan Horsburgh, Sonja Steptoe, and Julie Dam, "Staying Sexy at 30, 40, 50, 60," *People*, vol. 56, no. 6 (August 6, 2001): 61.

[7]Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Books Unread," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1904.

[8]I have no wish to reopen the phonics versus whole-language debate here; Jessie Wise and I treat this at greater length in our book *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*. Briefly, though: The best reading programs combine phonetic "decoding" skills (in which children are taught the sounds of letters and letter combinations as the first step in reading) with plenty of reading and oral language work ("whole language" techniques). However, if you learned to read sometime between 1930 and 1970, you were most likely taught *pure* "sight recognition" with no phonetic decoding at all (and although phonics began to return to favor in the late 1960s, plenty of classrooms from 1970 to the present have eliminated phonetic skills completely from their reading programs). If you learned to read through "sight methods" and are having trouble reading, the method obviously didn't work for you; you will benefit by learning the phonetic decoding skills that you missed back in first grade.

Chapter 3

Keeping the Journal: A Written Record of New Ideas

> Once a day . . . call yourselves to an account what new ideas, what new proposition or truth you have gained, what further confirmation of known truths, and what advances you have made in any part of knowledge.
>
> —ISAAC WATTS, *Improvement of the Mind*

FOR YEARS I'VE read Agatha Christie at bedtime. Christie's prose doesn't exactly sing, and by now I know how every single mystery ends. But I can read these books over and over again, because I'm using only half my brain, while the other half recycles the events of the day and tucks them away, one by one. I don't gain much from the book itself, but I sleep well.

The same half-attentive method of reading dogs me when I turn to serious literature. I read; a door slams; my attention wanders to the door, to the window, to undone jobs, to family dilemmas and work difficulties. I am not alone in this; our lives are full, and so are our minds. David Denby's lyrical complaint in *Great Books* is true of us all:

> I can no longer *submit* to fiction . . . I read and stop, read and stop, a train halted by obstacles on the track, bad weather, power failures. Everyone complains that young people, growing up on TV, movies, video games, and rap music, lack the patience for long, complex, written narratives, and yet as a child I had not watched all that much television, and I had also lost my patience in middle age . . . [M]y life had grown much more complex. I was married to a clever and formidable woman, and there were two kids running around; I had multiple jobs and a lot more to think about than I had had at eighteen. A much larger experience was now casting up its echoes.[1]

When we sit in front of Plato or Shakespeare or Conrad, "simply reading" isn't enough. We must learn to fix our minds, to organize our reading so that we are able to retain the skeleton of the ideas that pass in front of our eyes. We must not simply read, Isaac Watts tells us, but "meditate and study," an act that "transfers and conveys the notions and sentiments of others to ourselves, so as to make them properly our own."

How is this done? By keeping a journal to organize your thoughts about your reading. What we write, we remember. What we summarize in our own words becomes our own.

For earlier generations, the journal wasn't—as it is in modern times—primarily a tool to reflect on your feelings. Present-day use of the word *journal* tends to imply that you're creating a subjective, intensively inward-focused collection of thoughts and musings. Witness, for example, the ideas and exercises offered in a sample issue of the magazine *Personal Journaling:* travel journaling ("Which traditions or customs are you comfortable with and which make you uneasy? Why?"), dream journaling ("What does this dream tell me about the way I treat myself?"), creative journaling ("Focus on a specific topic and write everything you can think of, never lifting your

pen"), and mind-body journaling ("The wise teacher is within you, and through writing you can begin to 'hear' her more clearly"). (*Personal Journaling* also tells you how to make decorative handmade paper with newsprint, dryer lint, and a blender, should you wish to make your journal an *objet d'art* as well as a diary.)

But the journal of self-education has a more outward focus. It is modeled on the last century's "commonplace book," a looseleaf or bound blank book in which readers copied down quotes and snippets that they wanted to remember.

In its simplest form, the commonplace book was a handmade *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, a memory aid for the writer. Many commonplace books contained nothing but these quotes. They may be instructive for what the writer chooses to record; Jefferson's college-days *Commonplace Book* contains, among other quotations, Euripedes' observation "Alas, no one among mortals is free; for either he is the slave of wealth or fortune, or else the populace or legal technicalities compel him to resort to practices that are contrary to his belief." Commonplace books reveal, as Gilbert Chinard remarks on Jefferson's own collections, the extent to which "the study of the classics was . . . an essential part in the moral foundation of many of the men who framed the American institutions."[2] But these traditional commonplace books contain no musings on the collected quotes, no clue to the writer's thoughts as he copied Euripedes or Plato onto the page. The personal aspect is missing.

Occasionally, though, commonplace books took on a more personalized form. Their authors carried them around and jotted in them at odd moments during the day. The commonplace books gathered reflections, scraps of original verse and other creative writing, and summaries of books read, as well as the *de rigueur* bits of copied information. They became artificial memories.

The journal used for self-education should model itself after this expanded type of commonplace book. It is neither an unadorned collection of facts, nor an entirely inward account of what's going on in your heart and soul. Rather, the journal is the place where the reader takes external information and records it (through the use of quotes, as in the commonplace book); appropriates it through a summary, written in the reader's own words; and then evaluates it through reflection and personal thought. As you read, you should follow this three-part process: jot down specific phrases, sentences, and paragraphs as you come across them; when you've finished your reading, go back and write a brief summary about what you've learned; and then write your own reactions, questions, and thoughts.

In this way, the journal connects objective and subjective learning, an ideal described by Bronson Alcott in his own journal of 1834:

> Education is that process by which thought is opened out of the soul, and, associated with outward . . . things, is reflected back upon itself, and thus made conscious of its reality and shape. It is Self-Realization. . . . He who is seeking to know himself, should be ever seeking himself in external things, and by so doing will he be best able to find, and explore his inmost light.[3]

The goal of classical self-education is this: not merely to "stuff" facts into your head, but to understand them. Incorporate them into your mental framework. Reflect on their meaning for the internal life. The "external things"—be they Platonic philosophy, the actions of an Austen heroine, or a political biography—make us more conscious of our own "reality and shape." This, not mere accumulation, is the goal of self-education. The journal is the place where this learning happens.

The first step toward understanding is to grasp exactly what is being said, and the oldest and most reliable way of grasping information is to put it into your own words. To master the content of what you read, summarize.

Lydia Sigourney advises her young female readers to summarize their reading often:

> At the close of every week, abridge in writing, the subjects that you deem most valuable. . . . Write them neatly in a book kept for that purpose—but not in the

> language of the author. . . . Let this be a repository of condensed knowledge, the pure gold of thought. . . . To strengthen the memory, the best course is not to commit page after page verbatim [as though most of us would!], but to give the substance of the author, correctly and clearly in your own language.[4]

The journal should contain, first, the "substance" of what has been read.

These summaries often provide a jumping-off point for further reflections; E. M. Forster's *Commonplace Book* is just such an autodidact's journal. "Far more than a dictionary-defined compendium of striking 'quotations, poems and remarks,'" writes Philip Gardner, the editor of the version of the *Commonplace Book* published after Forster's death, "[I]t provides a commentary—sharp, wry, and frequently very moving—on the second half of Forster's life." Forster records snippets of his own reading:

> *Proverbs*
> He that blesseth his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it shall be counted a curse to him. XXVII 14
> As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man. XXVII 19
> Now all is done, save what shall have no end.
> —Shakespeare, Sonnet 110, Tyrwhitt's emendation.[5]

He evaluates his reading, recording his criticisms:

> *Hedda Gabler* fails because nothing of importance has been changed. . . . However Ibsen may have known this as well as me and have desired to stage absolute unimportance as his heroine. He certainly wishes to show her as cowardly, restless, and weak.[6]

The personal certainly isn't missing in Forster's *Commonplace Book*. In 1947 he jots down, apropos of nothing:

> The evening sky behind Fellows' Building. A cone of cloud . . . mottled with pink and gold—both faint, and the word mottled is too strong. Immensely large aesthetically speaking. I have no idea of its linear measurement.[7]

And in 1953, recovering from a visit to the dentist, he writes:

> Writers ought to write and I take up my pen in the hope it may loosen my spirit. . . . It is 6.45. Feb. 26th. . . .Tony Hyndman has been in. . . . I was not very friendly to him, I did not want to be bothered, and was not warm-hearted. . . . It is 7:30. Cannot writers write quicker? I have been "thinking."[8]

This is very close to the "creative journaling" of *Personal Journaling*. But more often than not, the personal is anchored to some phrase or idea that has struck Forster in his reading. He muses, for example, on a line from Thomas Gray:

> When Thomas Gray writes, "I know what it is to lose a person that one's eyes and heart have long been used to . . ." I recognize an affinity. Laziness and loyalty have a connection.[9]

And Forster's methods of summarizing and evaluating his reading exactly demonstrate the purpose of the classical journal. In 1942, Forster has just finished reading Thomas Hodgkin's *Italy and Her Invaders 376–476*. His journal entry reads, in part:

> *Why did Rome fall?* . . .
> Subsidiary causes were
> i. *The foundation of Constantinople*, due to fear of Persia: danger from the north never realised. "It was the diffusion of her vital force over several nerve centers, Carthage, Antioch, Alexandria, but above all Constantinople that ruined her. Some of the old

tree perished."
ii. *Christianity*—despite St. Augustine's view. For it opposed the deification of the Emperor which consecrated the state. . . .[10]

He concludes his summary of the reading, and then adds his own thoughts:

> My original impulse in this excursion was the discovery of parallels, then I was diverted into interest in the past, now that too is flagging, and I have driven myself with difficulty to finish this analysis. My ignorance and the powerlessness of knowledge weigh on me. . . ."[11]

This is a model of the summarizing that Sigourney recommends. Here Forster restates the main points of his reading in his own words, quotes word for word where Hodgkin supplies a succinct sentence of his own, connects each of Hodgkin's points to the woes of the present day, and then adds a heartfelt commentary on his own emotional reactions to the crumpling of great empires.

Thomas Merton followed a similar strategy in keeping his own notebooks. In *The Asian Journal*, collected from the notebooks kept during the last part of his life, we find, in the span of three pages, quotes copied from T. R. V. Murti's *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* ("Reflective consciousness is necessarily the consciousness of the false"), a record of Merton's morning walk ("I walked and said Lauds under the croptomeria trees on Observatory Hill, and the chanting came up strong and clear from below. A man was doing vigorous exercises by the shelter that overlooks the valley . . . shimmying in the sun"), and Merton's own summary of his reading, incorporating direct quotes ("Conze comments on the fact that communication between East and West has not so far done much for philosophy. 'So far European and particularly British philosophers have reacted by becoming more provincial than ever before'").[12]

Classical self-education demands that you understand, evaluate, and react to ideas. In your journal, you will record your own summaries of your reading; this is your tool for understanding the ideas you read. This—the mastery of facts—is the first stage of classical education.

THE THIRD STEP: PRACTICE TAKING NOTES AS YOU WRITE AND THEN SUMMARIZING

"If we would fix in the memory the discourses we hear," Watts writes, "or what we design to speak, let us abstract them into brief compends, and review them often." As the next step in your self-education, practice this skill with this book.

1. Invest in a journal: looseleaf notebook, blank book, or other type of journal.
2. Continue to keep to your schedule of reading four times per week. Use this time to read Chapter 4, jotting down notes and then writing brief summaries. Follow these guidelines:
   a. Write the title of the chapter on the first page of your notebook. Read through the entire chapter once without stopping. If any particular ideas, phrases, or sentences strike you, go ahead and jot them down.
   b. Chapter 4 is divided into three major sections. Try to summarize each section in your own words. Ask yourself: What is the most important point that the writer makes in this section? If I could remember only one thing from this section, what would it be? Now, what else does the writer tell me about this important point that I'd like to remember? Make the summary for each section a separate paragraph. Leave very wide margins (two to three inches) on either side of your paragraphs.
   c. When you have done this for the entire chapter, glance back over your summary paragraphs. Now write down your reactions to the information in

each summary. Use the margins of your paper for this (a different pen color is also helpful).

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[1]David Denby, *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 47.

[2]Gilbert Chinard, introduction to *The Literary Bible of Thomas Jefferson: His Commonplace Book of Philosophers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1928), p. 4.

[3]Amos Bronson Alcott, *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepard (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1938), p. 43.

[4]Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies*, pp. 54–55, 145.

[5]E. M. Forster, *Commonplace Book*, ed. Philip Gardner (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 139.

[6]Ibid., p. 36.

[7]Ibid., p. 174.

[8]Ibid., p. 192.

[9]Ibid., pp. 179–80.

[10]Ibid., p. 139.

[11]Ibid., p. 141.

[12]Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 139–41.

Chapter 4

Starting to Read: Final Preparations

> If you are fortunate, you encounter a particular teacher who can help, yet finally you are alone, going on without further mediation.
>
> —HAROLD BLOOM,
> *How to Read and Why*

IN THE END, there's not much a book can do for you: You must begin to read.

What a book (like this one) *can* do is hold your hand up to the point where you start reading. Most of all, a how-to-read book can assure you that the difficulty you have in reading doesn't necessarily reflect on your mental ability. Serious reading is hard work.

This should comfort you. If successful reading is a matter of innate intelligence, you can do little to improve yourself. But a task that is merely *difficult* can be broken down into small and manageable steps, and mastered through diligent effort. Reading the Great Books is no different.

The initial small step is simple: Rather than making a sweeping determination to tackle the Great Books (all of them), decide to begin on one of the reading lists in Part II. As you read each book, you'll follow the pattern of the *trivium*. First you'll try to understand the book's basic structure and argument; next, you'll evaluate the book's assertions; finally, you'll form an opinion about the book's ideas.

You'll have to exercise these three skills of reading—understanding, analysis, and evaluation—differently for each kind of book. If you want to evaluate a history, you must ask whether the historian's conclusions are supported by the historical facts he or she offers, whether there is enough information, and whether this information is trustworthy. If you want to judge a novel, you should instead ask whether it leads you along a path whose end is different than its beginning, whether its characters have motivations and ambitions and hang-ups that are recognizably human, and whether those motivations and ambitions and hang-ups give rise to the novel's crises and situations. To assess a science book, you would ask: What phenomena did the writer seek to explain? How did he observe those phenomena? (With his own eyes, by way of mathematical calculation, by deduction from what *could* be seen?) Is his explanation sufficient? If not, how (or when) does it fall short?

These three sets of criteria stem from the same general impulse: to ask whether the work is *accurate*. Is it *right*? (Or, to use Mortimer Adler's more loaded word, is it *true*?) But they are as different in practice as the criteria used to judge a Renaissance portrait and those used to evaluate a twentieth-century landscape or a twenty-first-century installation.

So consider the following as general principles for reading, principles that will be expanded and altered in the chapters that follow.

1. When you first read through a book, don't feel that you have to grasp completely every point that the writer is making. If you find yourself puzzled by a certain section, or not completely sure what the author means by a particular term,

turn down the corner of the page and keep on going. You'll have a chance to come back to that confusing section later on. The secret to reading a difficult book is simply this: Keep reading. You don't have to "get it all" the very first time through.

In the case of fiction, you may feel overwhelmed by a welter of unfamiliar names, but if you persevere (without feeling that you have to stop and sort everything out immediately), you'll find that by the third or fourth chapter you have come to know the central characters, almost imperceptibly; those who are not important will have faded offstage. In a work of serious nonfiction, you will become more familiar as the chapters progress with the author's favorite terms and phrases; you'll begin to gather a broad, vague, even inarticulate idea of what she's up to. Don't stop to look up unfamiliar words unless you absolutely have to. Don't use scholarly editions, packed with critical footnotes that stop you dead every time you hit a little superscript number. Don't fret over missing the nuances. Get the big picture, the broad sweep, the beginning, middle, and end. "Understanding half of a really tough book," writes Mortimer Adler in his classic *How to Read a Book*, "is much better than not understanding it at all, which will be the case if you allow yourself to be stopped by the first difficult passage you come to." In truth, it's impossible to fully understand difficult passages until you know how they fit into the rest of the writer's *schema*.

So the first stage of reading should be a liberating one. Just read, and keep reading.

Your first reading is your handshake with the book; your goal is to finish with a surface acquaintance that will deepen into true understanding as you read again to evaluate and analyze. If you don't understand what you're reading, don't stop; scribble a question mark in the margin, and keep going. You may well find that the earlier chapters of a book, confusing on first reading, suddenly make sense to you as you reach the book's middle or end.

2. Underline in your books, jot notes in the margins, and turn the corners of your pages down. Public education is a beautiful dream, but public classrooms too often train students not to mark, write in, disfigure, or in any way make books permanently their own. You're a grownup now, so buy your own books if you possibly can. In my opinion, a cheap paperback filled with your own notes is worth five times as much as a beautiful collector's edition.

If you know that you can turn down the corner of a confusing page and keep reading, or write a question in the margin and continue on, you'll find it easier to keep going on the first reading. If you have to use library books, invest in adhesive-backed notes (such as Post-its) and use them to mark pages that you'll want to return to; scribble your notes and questions on them. Bits of paper tend to fall out, though, and any good book will soon look like a papery porcupine. Defacing your book is much more efficient.

Ereaders are perfectly fine—but only if you're comfortable with the reader's notation and marking tools. If you find them unusable, go back to the archaic paperback-and-ballpoint-pen method.

3. When you first begin to read a book, read the title page, the copy on the back cover, and the table of contents. This puts you "in the picture" before you begin to read. Do *not* automatically read the preface. In the case of a nonfiction book, the preface may set the book in context for you, summarize the argument, or tell you just why the book is so important—certainly valuable information to have before you begin to read. But the preface can also give you a fully formed interpretation before you even read the book—something to be avoided. For example, E. V. Rieu's preface to his translation of the *Iliad* sums up the plot, tells you about Homer's use of delayed action, and explains briefly how the reader should understand Homer's similes and epithets. This makes the reading of the *Iliad* more rewarding, not less. But Anita Brookner's introduction to the Scribner edition of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, excellent though it is in itself, gives you a thumbnail sketch of the heroine's

character and motivations—something you should do yourself before turning to an expert to do it for you.

Generally, you should read the preface only if it has been written by the author (or translator) personally. If the preface or introduction was written by someone else, skip it. Read the first chapter of the book instead, and if you aren't lost or confused, keep on going; save the reading of the preface until you've finished reading the book itself. If the first chapter befuddles you, go back and read the preface before going on.

4. Don't take extensive notes on a first reading. First-reading notes tend to be far too detailed. You'll find yourself writing down many observations that seem important but later prove to be irrelevant, and all the note taking will slow you down. Instead, stop at the end of each chapter (or substantial section) to jot down a sentence —two at the most—in your journal. These sentences should summarize the chapter's content, main assertion, or most important event. But remember: You're constructing a broad outline, not a specific one. You're laying down the strokes of a coloring page, not drawing a careful sketch. Leave out details, even the important ones: "Paris and Menelaus decide to fight a duel to settle the war, but when Menelaus gets the upper hand, Aphrodite whisks Paris back to his own safe bedroom" is a good first-reading summary of the third chapter of the *Iliad*, even though it leaves out plenty of important details. (These summaries also make it easier to come back to a long and complicated book if your reading schedule has been disrupted and you can't remember what happened to Don Quixote in Chapter 7 by the time you reach Chapter 43.)

5. As you read, use your journal to jot down questions that come to your mind. Record your disagreements or agreements with the writer. Scribble down any reflections or connected thoughts that the book brings to your mind. These questions, disagreements, and reflections should be visually distinct from your summary of the book's content. You can write your summaries in a narrow column down the middle of your journal page and jot your remarks on the margins, or use one color pen for summary sentences and another for reflections, or keep separate pages for summaries and remarks. Try to note page numbers beside your comments, since you may want to go back and reread some sections of the book later on.

6. When you've finished your first reading, go back and assemble your summary sentences into an informal outline, an initial "table of contents." You don't yet have enough information to make a real outline, with some points made subordinate to others; all you need to do is arrange the sentences in order.

7. Now give the book a title (four to seven words) and a subtitle.

These won't be like the titles on the jacket, which were selected at least in part for eye-friendly euphony. Instead, the title should be a phrase that describes the book's main subject, while the subtitle should sum up the book's most important points. Aim for a title and subtitle like those of the seventeenth century: *The pilgrim's progress from this world to that which is to come: delivered under the similitude of a dream, wherein is discovered the manner of his setting out, his dangerous journey, and safe arrival at the desired country*. Seventeenth-century writers knew that a title which told the reader exactly what was about to happen was the best way to guarantee understanding. So give your book a short title—three or four words that seem to sum up the topic—and then write a subtitle that explains exactly what the book does.

Now you've completed the first and most intimidating task of the reader: You've gotten all the way through the book. Your first reading has given you a basic understanding of the book's parts and how they fit together. Don't worry too much if this series of steps seemed laborious and complicated; they will soon become second nature to you, an intuitive first approach to any difficult book.

You're ready for the second and third stages of inquiry.

Although you'll folllow the same basic steps in the grammar-stage (inital) reading of most books, the second stage of inquiry—the logic-stage evaluation—differs enormously from genre to genre. Poetry and history may not be worlds apart, but they're certainly located in different hemispheres, and science may well be orbiting on a minor moon.

The reader needs to approach each *kind* of book—each list in Chapters 5 through 10—with a distinct set of questions, a unique expectation. But the logic-stage *procedure* doesn't change. No matter what questions you ask, you'll always progress into the second stage of inquiry by doing the following:

1. Go back and reread those sections of the book that you identified as difficult. Can you make better sense of them, now that you've arrived at the book's end? Look back through your written comments: Do they tend to cluster around certain parts of the book? If so, glance back through those pages as well. Finally, reread your summaries. Can you identify which chapter contains the book's climax, the center of the writer's argument, or the author's own summary of his work? Reread that particular section of the book as well.
2. Dig deeper into the book's structure: Answer questions about how the writer has put his words together. The chapters that follow suggest questions for each genre. Jot your answers down in your notebook. Cite particular sentences, even paragraphs. These notes can be more detailed than those first-reading notes, since by this point you should have a clearer idea of which parts of the book are most worthy of your attention.
3. Ask: Why did the author write this book? What did he or she set out to do? Lay out facts, convince you of the truth in a set of deductions, give you an emotional experience? (We'll discuss this for each genre separately.)
4. Now ask: How well did the writer succeed? Did he successfully carry out his intention? If not, why? Where did he fall short? Are his facts unproven, his proofs inadequate, or his emotional scenes flat? What parts of the book did I find convincing; which ones left me unmoved?

As you continue to use your journal for this process, the pages will begin to reflect not only the content of the books you're reading, but the development of your own thought as you grapple with the books' ideas. Remember that the goal of grammar-stage reading is to know *what* the author says; the goal of logic-stage inquiry is to understand *why* and *how*.

The final stage of reading—your rhetoric-stage pass through the book—has a third goal. Now you know *what, why* and *how*. The final question is: *So what?*

What does this writer want me to do?

What does this writer want me to believe?

What does this writer want me to experience?

Am I convinced that I must do, or believe, what the writer wants me to do or believe?

Have I experienced what the writer wants me to experience?

If not, *why?*

Uninformed opinions are easy to come by. But thinking through someone else's argument, agreeing with it for specific, well-articulated reasons, or disagreeing with it because you're able to find holes in the writer's argument, or because the writer left out facts which he should have considered and didn't—that's difficult. The rhetoric stage follows the logic stage for this very reason. The good reader bases his opinion on intelligent analysis, not mere reaction.

The journal is an excellent logic-stage tool. But in the rhetoric stage of inquiry, you need something more. Rhetoric is the art of clear, persuasive communication, and persuasion always involves two people. In your case, one of these people is the book's author: The book is communicating an idea to you, persuading you of

something. But for you to articulate your own ideas clearly back to the book, you need to bring someone else into the process.

How can you do this? In her *Letters to Young Ladies*, Lydia Sigourney praises the virtues of "purposeful conversation," talk centered around particular ideas. In the nineteenth century, women often met in "weekly societies" to discuss their reading—the forerunners of today's popular book groups. These discussions, Sigourney suggests, are essential to proper self-education, since they "serve to fix knowledge firmly in the memory."[1]

The problem with book groups (as you know if you've ever been in one) is that the readers who attend them don't always read the book carefully (or at all), and unless someone takes a dictatorial hand during discussion, it's apt to wander off fairly quickly into unrelated chat. For the project of self-education, it's best to find one other person who will agree to read through the Great Books lists with you and then talk with you about what both of you have read.

This reading partner, indispensable in the final stage of reading, can also be useful to you in the first two. During the grammar and logic stages, your partner provides you with some accountability—if you've agreed to finish the first reading of a book by a particular deadline and you know someone else will be checking on you, you're much more likely to make good use of your own reading time to actually finish the book.

During your rhetoric-stage inquiry, when you'll be looking back through the book for answers to questions about the writer's ideas, your reading partner can talk to you about those ideas. Perhaps something that you found troublesome, or illogical, was entirely clear to your reading partner; discuss the differences, and discover which one of you is correct. You may find that the disagreement is only an apparent one, brought about by the use of different words for the same concept. Or you may realize that an apparent agreement between the two of you dissolves during discussion, perhaps because you are using the same words to represent very different things. A reading partner forces you to use words precisely and define your terms.

Ideally, your reading partner will read at more or less the same speed as you do, and can devote the same hours to the project of reading. But it isn't necessary for you to come from similar backgrounds, educational or otherwise. As a matter of fact, a reading partner with a very different background can help you to think more precisely, as you discover that you need to explain, clearly, ideas that you've always taken for granted.

If you don't have a reading partner who can meet with you face to face, you can conduct discussions by letter (or email, as long as you treat these dialogues as formal, requiring proper vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and punctuation, not resorting to the shorthand of e-communication). In 1814, Thomas Jefferson, obviously feeling isolated on his Virginia mountaintop, wrote to John Adams that Plato is

> one of the race of genuine sophists, who has escaped the oblivion of his brethren, first, by the elegance of his diction, but chiefly, by the adoption and incorporation of his whimsies into the body of artificial Christianity. His foggy mind is forever presenting the semblances of objects which, half seen through a mist, can be defined neither in form nor dimensions. . . . But why am I dosing you with these antediluvian topics? Because I am glad to have some one to whom they are familiar, and who will not receive them as if dropped from the moon.[2]

Like-minded neighbors are providential, but there are advantages to conducting rhetoric-stage discussions by letter. You can file your letters and their answers as informal essays, and glance back through them to refresh your memory about the books you've read (and publish them once you become president).

A NOTE ON EVALUATION

The chapters that follow will give you guidance in *how* to read different kinds of

literature: what structural elements to look for, what techniques to keep in mind, and above all, what questions you should ask of each kind of book. Your answers to these questions show your final understanding of the books you will read.

So how do you know whether you've gotten the answers right?

Getting "the answer" isn't exactly the point of the exercise. In classical education, the question-and-answer process is used as a teaching method; today, we call this "Socratic dialogue." A classical schoolmaster teaches the humanities, not through lectures that tell the student exactly what to think about each book, but through asking selected questions that direct the student's thoughts in the right way. The purpose of answering the questions isn't to provide the "right answer," as you would in a fill-in-the-blank test. You answer them as part of your effort to *think* about books.

This doesn't mean that you won't ever come up with a completely off-base (or what academics call "perverse") answer. Ideally, you would have a classical schoolmaster on hand to listen to your answers and gently steer you away from dead ends, toward more productive ways of thinking. In the process of self-education, you have two safeguards: your reading partner, who will listen to your ideas and tell you whether they're coherent; and the practice of quoting. Whenever you begin to answer one of the questions in the following chapters (for example, in the chapter on autobiography, "For what part of his—or her—life does the writer apologize?"), always quote a sentence or two directly from the work that you're examining. This helps to anchor your ideas, and forces you to be specific instead of abstract (it's relatively easy to make big, general statements, but specifics require thought) and protects you from coming up with "perverse readings." (On the other hand, "perverse" is often in the eye of the beholder, as a glance at any recent journal of literary criticism will suggest.)

Although you should always try to form your own ideas about a book before reading what others think, you can "check up" on yourself by skimming an essay or two of criticism that deals with your reading. Several Web sites offer plot outlines of great books along with very brief essays that survey critical issues: try www.pinkmonkey.com and www.sparknotes.com. Searching Google Books (books.google.com) with the title of the work in question, the author, and a word or phrase such as "critical essays," "criticism," or "critical analysis" can bring up published resources for you to glance over. (Check the publisher of any book that appears in your search results; university presses are much more likely to publish non-perverse criticism than self-publishing "presses" such as Xulon, Lulu, or CreateSpace. If you don't know which publishers are "vanity presses," the Internet is your friend; do a search for "self-publishing presses" and the top twenty will pop up immediately.)

If you live near enough to a college or university to use its library, search its holdings (you can do this online, in most cases, by going to the university Web site and looking for the "Library" link). Look for collections of essays on a particular book, rather than book-length critical works, which are dense and complex. The "Modern Critical Essays" series, edited by Harold Bloom (*1984: Modern Critical Essays; Anna Karenina: Modern Critical Essays,* and so on) contains essays by a number of well-known critics and will give you a good overview of the critical take on a work.

If you continue to wonder whether your ideas are valid or completely off base, you can use a college or university in another way. Call the department secretary (the English department for novels, autobiographies, poetry, and drama; the history department for history; you're probably out of luck if you're reading science) and ask whether you could make an appointment to visit a faculty member during office hours. Tell the secretary which book you want to discuss; she should be able to direct you to the right instructor. Have your ideas written out before you go (this doesn't need to be a formal "paper," just a string of paragraphs expressing your thoughts). Tell the instructor you've been reading *Moby-Dick,* or the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs, describe your own ideas, and ask what you've missed. Don't overuse this

resource (you're not paying tuition, after all), but in most cases an instructor will respond graciously to one or two requests for help. Universities, particular public ones, do have an obligation to "town" as well as to "gown," and asking for an appointment or two is not the same as asking for regular weekly tutorials.

College instructors are generally overworked; you'll get a better response if you call during the summer or over holidays. And don't ask for appointments right at the beginning, middle, or end of a semester, when new class syllabi, midterms, and finals fill every instructor's horizon.

A NOTE ON THE LISTS THAT FOLLOW

The lists that follow allow you to read chronologically through six different types of literature: fiction; autobiography; history and politics; drama; poetry; and science and natural history.

When you read chronologically, you reunite two fields that should never have been separated in the first place: history and literature. To study literature is to study what people thought, did, believed, suffered for, and argued about in the past; this *is* history. And although we do learn from archaeological discoveries, our primary source of information about former times has always been the writings of people who lived in the past. History can't be detached from the study of the written word. Nor should literature be removed from its historical context. A novel can tell you more about a writer's times than a history textbook; an autobiography reveals the soul of an entire society, not just the interior life of an individual man or woman. The sciences suffer when they are treated as a clear lens into "truth," because the theory of the biologist or astronomer or physicist may have as much to do with the scientist's society—and the questions that preoccupy it—as it has to do with pure discovery.

Writers build on the work of those who have gone before them, and chronological reading provides you with a continuous story. What you learn from one book will reappear in the next. But more than that: You'll find yourself following a story that has to do with the development of civilization itself. When you read through the poetry list, for example, you'll begin with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, progress on through the *Odyssey*, the *Inferno*, John Donne, William Blake, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and Langston Hughes (among others). The structure of the poetry will change as each poet moves beyond what former writers have done. But beyond these technical differences, the concerns of the poets shift and change as the world itself hurtles toward modernity: away from the nature of heroism and the quest for eternal life, toward the difficulties of simple existence in a chaotic and planless world. When you've finished with this particular list, you've done more than read poetry. You have learned something about the spiritual evolution of the West.

Although you can choose any of the lists to begin with, they are arranged from the least intimidating form of reading (the novel) on up to the two most intimidating (poetry, difficult because of its highly stylized language, and science, which scares most readers who gave up on math as soon as the SATs were over). The reading techniques suggested for some of the later chapters also build on techniques described earlier. So if you want to skip the fiction list and go straight to autobiography and politics, consider reading through my introduction to the fiction list first.

Do not feel bound to read *every* book on the list. If you read only two or three books on each list, you're likely to miss most of the benefits of reading chronologically. But if you simply cannot wade through a book after a good solid try, put it down and go on to the next book on the list. Don't jettison the whole project because you can't stand *Paradise Lost*. Even literary scholars have books that they have never managed to get all the way through. My *bête noire* is *Moby-Dick*; I know it's one of the great works of American literature, but I have made at least eight runs at it during my adult life and have never managed to get past midpoint. I even took an entire graduate seminar on Melville, did a presentation, and got an A without finishing the book. (Which says something about the state of graduate education, but

that's another topic.)

Some books speak to us at one time of life and are silent at another. If a book remains voiceless to you, put it down and read the next book on the list.

You don't have to progress all the way through grammar-stage reading, logic-stage inquiry, and rhetoric-stage discussion for every book. If a book enthralls you, linger over it. If you just barely make it through the first reading and close it with relief, there's no reason to feel that you *must* go on to the next stage of inquiry.

A final disclaimer: List making is a dangerous occupation. No list of "Great Books" is canonical, and all lists are biased; they reflect the interests of the person who drew them up. These particular lists are not meant in any way to be comprehensive. They do not even include all of the "greatest" works in each field. Rather, they are designed to introduce readers to the study of a particular area of thought. In some cases, I have included books because of their popularity or influence, not because they are the "best"; Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, is unsatisfying as autobiography and irrational as political philosophy, and Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* has enormous flaws in the way it handles historical data. But Friedan's book started a revolution, and Hitler's started a war. In both cases, these books are important because of their *cultural* influence; they caused readers to look at American marriages, or the problem of national identity, with new interest. Their popularity is part of the history that you are studying when you read chronologically.

You should feel free to add to the lists or to subtract from them. They are intentionally short; expand them. They may not include your favorite author; pencil him or her in. They may include works that you think are trivial or offensive; cross those off.

Make the lists your own. Above all, don't feel that you need to write the list maker and complain.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON FORMATS

Many of the older books on these lists are available in multiple editions. I have attempted to find editions that combine readability (decent-sized fonts that don't offend the eye), affordability (so that you can buy the books and *write* in them), and, where possible, an absence of intrusive critical commentary. (Footnoted or marginal interpretations have the potential to distract you from the book's actual content; at worst, they give you the wrong interpretation of a book's meaning before you've had a chance to think about it yourself.)

I have not listed all available ebook editions for each title, but electronic versions are fine as long as you are comfortable making use of the notation and bookmarking tools provided by your particular ereader. It's vital that you write down your thoughts and reactions as you read.

Be careful when ordering ebook versions of books in the public domain. Often, the edition you view is not the one that downloads, and it is very easy to pay money for a sloppy, badly edited ebook that's worse than a free online version.

The same is true of print books. If you're ordering a paperback of a public domain title, be sure to look for one from a reputable publisher, rather than a print-on-demand version (CreateSpace, Lulu, Blurb, Lightning Source, and many others). Anyone can snag the text of a public domain book and throw it up for sale using one of these services, and you're as likely as not to get a smeary, unedited, badly bound pile of pages in exchange for your credit card number.

Many of these books are available as audiobooks. There's absolutely nothing wrong with listening instead of reading for your first read-through. You're still experiencing the text. But make sure that you select an unabridged, non-dramatized version; otherwise, you're getting an interpretation, not the book itself. (And you'll still need a print or ebook version for your second and third levels of inquiry.) I have not listed all available audio versions, but have noted when one is particularly well-

done.

Consult this book's website, http://susanwisebauer.com/welleducated mind, for additional recommended editions and links to public domain ebooks.

THE FOURTH STEP: PRACTICING GRAMMAR-STAGE READING SKILLS

Six principles govern the "first stage" of reading:

1. Plan on returning to each book more than once to reread sections and chapters.
2. Underline or mark passages that you find interesting or confusing. Turn down the corners of difficult sections; jot your questions in the margin.
3. Before you begin, read the title page, the copy on the back, and the table of contents.
4. At the end of each chapter or section, write down a sentence or two that summarizes the content. Remember not to include details (this will come later).
5. As you read, use your journal to jot down questions that come to your mind.
6. Assemble your summary sentences into an informal outline, and then give the book a brief title and an extensive subtitle.

If you completed *The Third Step*, you've already practiced some of these skills in summarizing and reacting to Chapter 4. Now use all of the principles of grammar-stage reading on the first ten chapters of *Don Quixote*. This massive novel is the first work on the Great Books list in the next chapter. Its length may be intimidating, but a first reading of its opening chapters will reassure you: the story is engaging, and the style accessible.

1. Read the title page, back cover, and table of contents. (I recommend the 2003 Edith Grossman translation, or the abridged version done by Walter Starkie.)
2. In the case of *Don Quixote*, Edith Grossman has provided a Translator's Note; read through it and note down in your journal, under the heading "Preface," any important points that you'd like to remember. Personally, I would hold off on reading the introductory essay by Harold Bloom (I'd want to make my own run at the book first).
3. Read the author's prologue. Summarize its main points in two or three sentences.
4. Read Chapters 1–10. At the end of each chapter, write down two or three sentences that will remind you exactly what happened. If you find yourself particularly interested in a passage, bracket it and turn the corner of your page down. Jot any questions or remarks into the margins of your journal.
5. Now go back and make your own table of contents, using your summary sentences from Chapters 1–10. You'll probably want to boil each summary down into a single sentence: what's the central event in each chapter? This should become your chapter title for the table of contents.
6. If this were the entire story of Don Quixote, what would you title it? What would your subtitle be?

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[1]Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies*, p. 147.

[2]Thomas Jefferson, *Crusade Against Ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on Education*, ed. Gordon C. Lee (New York: Columbia University Teacher's College Bureau of Publications, 1961), pp. 110–11.

PART

II

Reading:

JUMPING INTO THE GREAT CONVERSATION

know it today emerged in the eighteenth century, in the hands of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. Defoe borrowed the conventions of the traveler's tale and produced *Robinson Crusoe*; Richardson used the traditional "epistolary" form (a set of letters written by a character) and turned it into *Pamela*. Fielding, a playwright, found his style cramped by the severe new laws against on-stage obscenity; he wrote *Joseph Andrews* instead. (The "lewd passages" of *Joseph Andrews* are practically invisible to modern eyes, but the story certainly couldn't have been staged in eighteenth-century London.)

These three stories used old conventions but filled them with something new: a glance into the internal life of an individual *person*. Before the eighteenth century, long stories written in prose featured entire chessboards full of static characters, shuffled through series of events in order to tell the story of a nation, explain an idea, or illustrate a set of virtues (as in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene)*. But Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding produced a new kind of book: the Book of the Person.

They weren't the first. Over in Spain, a century and a half before Defoe, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra had already written the first Book of the Person: the story of Don Quixote, the gentleman of La Mancha who decided to become a knight errant. But Cervantes was a lone genius. Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson together began a literary movement that flowered, full-blown, into a new kind of literature: the prose narrative that explores the interior life of a character.

This new form, the "novel," had to compete with another, less respectable literary form, the "romance." The romance was roughly equivalent to the modern soap opera. Romances, in the words of one eighteenth-century critic, involved "exalted personages" in "improbable or impossible situations." Romances were light and escapist, and were thus reading suitable only for women. (Conventional wisdom held that women's brains weren't up to grappling with "real life" anyway, so they might as well read fantasies.) Romance reading was not a manly and respectable pastime.

Novelists, on the other hand, wanted to be taken very seriously indeed. Novels dealt with real people in familiar situations; as Samuel Johnson wrote in 1750, novelists tried to "exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind."[3] But eighteenth-century readers were a little confused by this distinction between the tawdry "romance" and the noble "novel"—and novelists such as Swift, who insisted on trotting his hero through fantastic landscapes, didn't improve matters. For decades, novels came in for a large share of the general disdain that educated readers felt for romances. Eighteenth-century intellectuals moaned about the corrupting influence of novels in much the same way that organic-food zealots trumpet the dangers of refined sugar. Clergy warned their flocks that novel reading would produce an increase in prostitution, adultery, and (according to the bishop of London in 1789) earthquakes.

Yet the novel prospered. Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding had produced their innovations during a time when the individual *self*, with all its traumas and dilemmas, was of great interest to the public at large. Thanks in large part to the Protestant Reformation, the soul (at least in England and America, the sources of all the eighteenth-century and most of the nineteenth-century novels on our list) was imagined as a lone entity, making its solitary way through a vast and confusing landscape. John Bunyan's Christian, called by Evangelist to forsake his doomed city and find the wicker gate, is called alone. He has to put his fingers in his ears and run away from his wife and children to find salvation, separating himself from every human tie in order to unite himself with God.

Interest in the private self was on the upswing, impelled not only by Protestantism but by capitalism, which encouraged each person to think of himself (or herself) as an individual, able to rise up through society's levels toward wealth and leisure. The self was no longer part of a rigid, unshifting feudal system, with responsibilities beginning at birth and never changing thereafter. The self was free.

Reams have been written on this subject, but for our purposes it's enough to know

that this sense of an individual self with a private internal life was central to all the major developments of modern Western life: Enlightenment thought, the Protestant religion, the development of capitalism, and (of course) the novel. Novelists celebrated the individual: Charlotte Brontë's tortured and passionate heroes; Jane Austen's heroines, maneuvering through a society that both protects and hampers them; Nathaniel Hawthorne's tortured, adulterous clergyman. And the public bought, and read.

Popularity is always a double-edged sword, though. The intellectual elite had already been suspicious of the novel, because of its identification with the "romance." Now they were doubly suspicious. After all, books that everyone reads can't really be worthy of attention by the most educated. (Call it the Oprah effect.) To make things worse, this public readership was mostly female, since middle-class women had the money to buy novels and the leisure to read them, but not the Latin and Greek necessary to appreciate the sterner, more manly "classics." Novels, sniffed the scholar Charles Lamb were the "scanty intellectual viands of the whole female reading public." (Lamb is now primarily remembered as a reteller of Shakespeare for children, which serves him right.)

How did novelists fight back? By playing up their connection with real life. Fantastic tales were scorned. Stories about reality gained critical acclaim.

Fantastic tales didn't disappear, but they were relegated to the scorned realm of the popular. In the nineteenth century, the soap opera of choice was the "Gothic novel," a story of mystery and vague supernatural threat, set in fantastic and menacing places (or in central Europe, which, for most readers, amounted to the same thing). Gothic heroines languished in ruined castles, threatened by ancient spells, insane wives, and mysterious noblemen who avoid sunlight and mirrors. Here is Emily of the wildly popular *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: plucky but not too bright, wandering through the strange echoing castle of Count Morano. Since she's all alone in the dark, she decides that this would be a good time to peer beneath the black veil that covers a mysterious picture in a deserted room. "She paused again," the narrator tells us breathlessly, "and then, with a timid hand, lifted the veil; but instantly let it fall—perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture, and, before she could leave the chamber, she dropped senseless on the floor."

A few brave novelists—notably Hawthorne, who could never resist a touch of supernatural horrors, and Emily Brontë, who had a weakness for ghosts at windows—borrowed Gothic elements to jazz up their tales of adulterous Puritans and unhappy moor residents. But most serious writers rejected the fantastic in favor of the real. The novel even developed a social conscience. Charles Dickens and his American counterpart, Harriet Beecher Stowe, used their stories to kick against the injustices of a market economy that built wealth on the backs of the weak; Dickens protested English society's use of children for labor, while Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* put a human face on the slave labor that made the southern economy run. (Stowe, quite by accident, turned into an economic dynamo in her own right; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, according to the historian Joan D. Hedrick, "generated an industry of Uncle Tom plates, spoons, candlesticks, games, wallpapers, songs, and stage spin-offs that ran continuously for the next ninety years.")[4]

The earliest writers had seen nothing wrong with pointing out the fictional nature of their stories ("I would wish this book," Cervantes tells the reader, "the child of my brain, to be . . . the cleverest imaginable"). But later novelists avoided this sort of intrusion into the narrative. They wanted readers to discover a *real* world, not an imaginary one. The late-nineteenth-century novel wasn't supposed to be the child of the writer's brain; it was intended to be an accurate record of ordinary life.

This new philosophy of *realism* turned the novelist into a sort of scientist. Like the scientist, the novelist recorded every detail rather than selectively describing scenes—which tended to make most realistic novels very, very long. The father of realism, the French novelist Gustave Flaubert, was so determined to portray real characters in a real country town that he drew maps and diagrams of his imaginary

environmental factors, and then described the resulting behavior. The naturalist's job (in his or her own eyes, at any rate) was just like the scientist's: Put the rat in the maze, watch what it does, and record the outcome without elaboration.

And so we arrive at the twentieth century. The style of realism, with its careful cataloguing of detail, is still with us. Don DeLillo begins his 1985 novel *White Noise* with his narrator leaning out a window, watching the college kids arrive for the first day of class: "The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories. The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. . . ." And so on.

But the *ideas* behind the novel have changed since realism's heyday. The novel is generally considered to have moved through "modernity" to "postmodernity." Defining these two terms is tricky, since no one realized that modernity existed until it had been replaced by postmodernity, which simply means "following modernity."

"The dirty secret of higher academics," a colleague told me one day, "is that none of us really know exactly what postmodernism is." It would probably help if critics were able to state in English what modernism is, first; the critic James Bloom, for example, writes that modernism involves "density, the generic ambiguity, and the understanding of . . . [the novelist's] own status as mediated and mediating," which doesn't move us much forward.[6] Most other definitions are just as opaque.

More simply, then: Modernism is a type of realism. It too strives to portray "real life." But modernists, writing during and after two world wars, saw that their Victorian ancestors were deluded. The Victorians thought that they could understand what life was all about, but the modernists knew that "real life" was actually beyond understanding. "Real life" was chaotic, planless and unguided, and so the "scientific style" of the modernist is chaotic, refusing to bring novels neatly into any kind of resolution. To quote Dorothy L. Sayers (a good Anglican who responded to modernism by asserting her own belief in God and writing mysteries, an exceedingly unchaotic form of literature):

> Said a rising young author, "What, what?
> If I think that causation is not,
> No word of my text
> Will bear on the next,
> And what will become of the plot?"[7]

Absence of plot made the modernist novel very difficult to read, especially for the common reader who hankered for a *story*.

But the modernists tended to scorn story. One of modernism's most unattractive aspects was its snobbery. Modernist writers distrusted the masses and put all their faith in a small, well-educated elite. Several prominent modernists (most notably Ezra Pound) supported fascism and sneered at democracy. And the most well known were particularly savage about "popular fiction." The novel was an intellectual exercise, not a form of entertainment, and readers who wanted entertainment were welcome to go buy a dime-store Western. Virginia Woolf moaned that the novelist was a "slave" to the necessity of selling books; she longed for a fiction that could be free, with "no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest, or catastrophe in the accepted style." E. M. Forster wrote that "oh dear, yes—the novel tells a story," but wished with all his heart that the market wouldn't demand "story," that "low atavistic form." (As both Forster and Woolf ended up telling quite interesting stories, the market apparently won out in the end.)

No one likes to be condescended to, so it's hardly surprising that so many high school students develop a loathing for the modernist novels they're forced to read in senior English and go to the movies instead. (Movies have plots, after all.) They're

Sometimes (especially in Russian works) characters have two (or more) names; your character list can help keep them straight. If the novel deals with a family, you should put the characters into a genealogical table (otherwise, you'll never keep the relationships in *Oliver Twist* straight).

Briefly note the main event of each chapter. As you finish each chapter, write one or two sentences describing the chapter's main event in your notebook. These should be memory joggers for you, not a detailed *précis* of the plot. Try to limit yourself to one major event per chapter. "Don Quixote decides to be a knight, so he chooses Aldonza Lorenzo to be his lady and renames her Dulcinea del Toboso" is a perfectly good summary of Chapter 1 of *Don Quixote*. These sentences will help you grasp the book's overall flow—not to mention making it easier to pick your reading back up after an interruption. At some point in your reading, at least one crisis will temporarily derail your study time, and you don't want to have to reread four hundred pages of plot development because you've forgotten what happened before.

Make initial notes on passages that seem interesting. During this initial reading, don't stop to write down long reflections on the book's content. But if you come across a passage that seems particularly important, bracket it with your pencil, turn down the corner of the page, and write a note to yourself in your journal ("Page 31: Is it important that *book*s drove Don Quixote out of his wits?"). Distinguish these notes in some way from your content summaries; write them in the journal margins, on a different page, or in a different-color ink.

Give the book your own title and subtitle. When you finish reading the book, go back and reread your chapter summaries. Do they provide you with a clear, coherent outline of what happens in the book? If so, you can move on to the next step: titling. If not, rewrite your summaries: delete those details which now seem inessential, add important events or characters that you might have missed.

Once you're happy with your outline, give the book a brief title and a longer subtitle. Before you can do this, though, you'll need to answer two questions:

1. Who is the central character in this book?
2. What is the book's most important event?

If you have difficulty answering these questions, ask yourself: Is there some point in the book where the characters change? Does something happen that makes everyone behave differently? There are plenty of important moments in *Pilgrim's Progress*, but the story's hero changes most drastically right at the beginning, when he hears Evangelist's words and runs through the wicket gate, crying, "Life, life, eternal life!" He is a different man afterward—and although he goes through multiple trials and temptations, his new personality does not alter. Glance back through the list of major events that you've jotted down for each chapter and try to identify the most central and life-changing of them all.

Once you find this event, ask yourself: Which character is the most affected? This is likely to be the book's hero (or heroine). (And don't fret too much about this question; you may change your mind after you've done a second, more intensive reading of the book's important sections.)

Now give your book a title that mentions the main character, and a subtitle that tells how that character is affected by the book's main event. *Christian's Journey to the Celestial City: How an ordinary man responded to Evangelist's invitation by leaving his home and beginning a journey in which he meets various figures that represent biblical truths, faces Apollyon, triumphs over a number of temptations that try to pull him away from the road to the City, and finally crosses over the Jordan to glory*: This sums up the story.

The Second Level of Inquiry: Logic-Stage Reading

Your first reading of the book should give you a sense of the story as a whole—one sweeping tale that you pursue from beginning to end, without stopping to ruminate or look up details. Now you'll narrow your gaze to individual elements of the book. Ideally, you would reread the whole novel at this point, but unless you're independently wealthy and unmarried (like the gentlemen-scholars of previous centuries), you probably won't. Instead, go back through the bracketed or bookmarked sections that you noted on your first read-through. Some will now appear irrelevant; others will suddenly reveal themselves to be central.

If you were reading nonfiction, you would now begin to analyze the writer's argument: What idea is she trying to convince you of? What evidence does he give you for believing this argument?

But fiction has a different end than philosophy, or science, or history. The novel doesn't present you with an argument; it invites you to enter another world. When you evaluate a nonfiction work, you will ask: Am I persuaded? But when you evaluate a novel, you must instead ask: Am I transported? Do I see, feel, hear this other world? Can I sympathize with the people who live there? Do I understand their wants and desires and problems? Or am I left unmoved?

Like any other skill, thinking critically about a novel becomes simpler with practice. The following brief guide to literary analysis isn't meant as a graduate course in literary criticism. Nor is it intended to turn you into a critic. Rather, these questions will begin to guide your thinking into a more analytical mode. As you practice asking and answering them, other questions (and answers) will come to mind.

In your journal, write down answers to the following questions. Not all of them will apply to every novel, of course; if one of the questions doesn't seem to have any good answer, skip it and move on. And remember that there are not, necessarily, "right answers" to these questions. (Critics can argue unceasingly about whether *Moby-Dick* is closer to realism or to fantasy.) But whenever you write down an answer, quote *directly from the novel* in order to support your answer. This will keep you focused on the book. Using a direct quote prevents you from making general—and thus meaningless—assertions, such as "*Moby-Dick* is about man's search for God." That sentence must immediately be followed by, "This can be seen in the scene where . . ." and a description of the scene.

Is this novel a "fable" or a "chronicle"? Every novelist belongs in one of two camps. Some writers want to draw us into a world very like our own; they tell us how people behave, moment by moment, in lives governed by the same rules that regulate our own lives. These writers convince us that every emotion stems from a cause, every action from a reaction. These writers produce "chronicles"—stories set in our own universe.

Other novelists never try to convince us that the world of the book is real. These once-upon-a-time fables transport us into a place where different laws apply. "I sailed from England," Gulliver remarks, "and was captured by men three inches high." "And then I saw that there was a way to hell, even from the gates of heaven," Christian tells us. The writer of fables begins not with, "At 9 a.m. on a rainy Saturday in June," but rather with "Once upon a time . . ." *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gulliver's Travels* were written by fable-tellers; *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, by chroniclers.[8]

This is the first question you must ask of a novel: Is this narrative taking place in a world that is governed by the same rules that govern *my* existence? Or are there fantastic events in the book that don't square with reality as I know it?

Once you've answered this question, you can then consider one of these three questions (again, try to jot down a quote or two from the novel in support of each answer):

(Elizabeth Bennet's mother, father, and younger sister, all pursuing their own needs, are unmindful of their disastrous effect on Elizabeth's struggling romance.)

The block in the heroine's way doesn't have to be a person. A collection of circumstances, a malign force that constantly pushes her in the wrong direction, an impersonal set of events that have united to complicate her life—these can also keep a character from getting what she wants. The novelist's world may demonstrate that human beings are always at the mercy of a flawed, fallen creation—or an uncaring, mechanical universe in which they are as insignificant as flies.

Once you've identified, at least tentatively, a character's wants and the "block" that keeps him from fulfilling them, you can begin to answer the third question: What strategy does a character follow in order to overcome the difficulties that stand in his way? Does he bulldoze his way through the opposition, using strength or wealth to overcome his difficulties? Does he manipulate, scheme, or plan? Does he exercise intelligence? Grit his teeth and keep on going? Buckle under the pressure, wilt and die? This strategy produces the plot of the novel.

These basic questions will take you through even the most modern novels on the list. Characters have always longed for escape, freedom, an ideal existence, control of their lives. Jack Gladney of DeLillo's *White Noise* wants to find the *inherent* meaning of life, not the meaning imposed on him by the corporations that have already constructed the story of his life for him (a story that involves his constant purchase of all the things they manufacture). What keeps him from discovering this meaning? Does he manage to find it in the end? (Three guesses.)

Who is telling you this story? Stories don't just float in the air; they are told by a voice. Whose voice is it? Or, in other words, what *point of view* does the writer adopt?

Point of view, like other aspects of fiction, can be broken into dozens of types, each subtlely different. Unless you plan to make a detailed study of the art of fiction,[10] you only need to be familiar with the five basic points of view. Each has its advantages and tradeoffs.

1. First-person point of view ("I") gives a very immediate, but limited, perspective. First person allows you to hear a character's most private thoughts—but in exchange, you can only see what happens within the character's line of sight, and you can only know those facts that the character is herself aware of.

2. Second-person ("You walk down the street and open the door . . .") is uncommon, generally used only in experimental works (and adventure games). Like first-person point of view, second person keeps the reader intimately involved with the story, and brings a sense of immediacy far beyond what first person can produce. But second person also tends to limit the writer to the present tense, cutting off any reflection on the past.

3. Third-person limited (also called "third-person subjective") tells the story from the viewpoint of one particular character, delving into that character's mind, but using the third-person pronouns *(he* or *she)* rather than the first-person pronouns. This perspective allows the writer to gain a little bit of distance from the story, but still limits the writer to those events that the viewpoint character can actually see and hear. A useful variant on this—and perhaps the most common narrative strategy in the novels listed below—is "third-person multiple," which allows the writer to use the viewpoints of several different characters, jumping from the "inside" of one character to the "inside" of another in order to give multiple perspectives.

4. "Third-person objective" tells the story from a removed, distant perspective. The narrator can see everything that is happening, as though he were hovering in space above the scene, but can't look into the heart or mind of any character. The writer who uses third-person objective gains a sort of scientific, dispassionate perspective but loses the ability to tell us what the characters are thinking and feeling; we have to deduce this from the characters' actions and expressions. Third-person

These mechanical exercises can help you begin to evaluate whether the writer's style is "plain" (short, common words, simple sentences) or more complex and ornamental.

Now take three passages of dialogue from three different characters and compare them, using the above exercise. Do all these characters talk alike? (This is a very common flaw—even in the work of great writers.) Or do their patterns of speech reflect the fact that they have different backgrounds, different jobs, different lives?

Finally, take note of any departures from standard conventions of punctuation and capitalization. Does the writer intentionally make use of fragments or run-on sentences? How are proper names treated? Is dialogue marked traditionally, or set off in some other way? If there *are* departures, how does this change your experience of the book? Try rewriting a sentence or paragraph (or more), re-inserting the conventions you learned in high school English. Compare with the original. What difference does your rewrite make?

Images and metaphors. Is any particular image repeated again and again? Do the characters find themselves continually crossing water or walking through the woods? Does a particular color (a white dress, a white rose, a white sky) occur more than once? In *The Great Gatsby*, a pair of huge wooden eyes, abandoned by the optometrist who intended to use them as a billboard, looks mournfully out over an ashy plain. A. S. Byatt's *Possession* makes great use of the colors green and blue and their relationship to water and to glacier ice.

Once you've found a repeated image, ask: Is this a metaphor, and if so, what does this represent? A *metaphor* is a physical object or act that stands for something else—an attitude, a situation, a truth. A metaphor is different from an allegory. An allegory involves a one-to-one correspondence between different story elements and the realities for which they stand; an allegory is a *set* of related metaphors, whereas a metaphor is a single image that may bear multiple meanings. The huge wooden eyes in *Gatsby* reoccur several times. Like the eyes of God, they constantly watch the characters, but they are blind and uncaring and bring no meaning to the lives under their gaze. They also look out over a plain that should have developed into a bustling business district but instead turned into a wasteland. So the wooden eyes serve as a metaphor for the absence of God, but also draw our attention to the essential emptiness in the glittering, prosperous lives of Daisy and her circle.

Beginnings and endings. Now take a moment to examine the opening and closing scenes. The beginning of a novel should draw you immediately into the story's central problem. Does the writer hint at a mystery, begin to sketch out an incomplete scenario you don't immediately understand? If so, perhaps the intent of the book is to show how human beings can triumph over partial knowledge, using their wits and determination to bring meaning to confusion. Does the book begin with violence and color, drawing you in through sheer action? If so, perhaps the intent is to portray humans as busy and effective in their world. Does it begin with passivity and stagnation? Perhaps the intent is the opposite: to show humanity's essential helplessness. "It is a truth universally acknowledged," begins Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*, "that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." That single sentence contains all of the novel's major themes: the necessity of marriage, the desire for independent prosperity, and the shifting nature of "universally acknowledged truths," since the characters find their deepest convictions overturned, one by one, as the story unfolds. Henry James begins *The Portrait of a Lady* with a tea party on the front lawn of an English house: "Real dusk would not arrive for many hours," he writes, "but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf." The tranquility and languor of the European scene is soon shattered by the arrival of an energetic American, and this conflict between old and new cultures is James's central preoccupation.

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