Published as _*Essay* in *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*
(ISSN 2366-4142)

A Memoir of My Reading

Bennett Gilbert

bbg2@pdx.edu

https://pdx.academia.edu/BennettGilbert

Bennett Gilbert is adjunct Assistant Professor of History and Philosophy at Portland State University, USA. He is the author of *A Personalist Philosophy of History* (Routledge, 2019) and of *Power and Compassion: On Moral Force Ethics and Historical Change* (forthcoming from Amsterdam University Press), as well as of numerous papers, and is co-editor of *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History: A Cross-Cultural Approach* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

Keywords

Antiquarianism, Jewishness, philosophical methods, reading

Publication Date

Issue 16, May 31, 2024

How to Cite

Bennett Gilbert. "A Memoir of My Reading." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 16 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400>

On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture
Issue 16 (2024): Ways of Reading
www.on-culture.org
https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

A Memoir of My Reading

_Abstract

Surveying nearly seven decades of habitual and obsessive reading, I consider how my character and psychology used reading to shape philosophical questions that move me into forms in which I could pursue them by reading. This became both the method and the substance of my philosophical work. It preserved some core emotional issues but also gave me the way to integrate them into scholarship and into my life.

I do not know where I was taught to read, or exactly when, or by whom. At the least I reckon that I have been reading for 66 years now, because I am now 71. Although I have many very early memories, including crib and high-chair memories, the oblivescence of my instruction in reading indicates to me that I immediately adopted reading into my inner self, as if it were such a basic part of myself, like my eyes or my limbs, that it had no origin other than my coming into existence. It was what I am, from before I learned it. This means, as well, that it was part of the problem of who and what I am, straight from the start.

By eight years old I was a local notable in the matter of reading. Reading was, in fact, almost the only thing I did that I desired to do, apart from swimming. My mother, too, preferred reading to housework, cooking, and working as a bookkeeper. She read massive numbers of murder mysteries. She loved Simenon's Maigret stories, as I do. She read a great many of the stories that "Ellery Queen" churned out. She had wanted an education, but in her family, in her time, a daughter could not attain that. That is why she obsessively read. For her, I think, the detective who solved the crime was a kind of learned man or woman, a rabbi. Reading, even reading detective stories, linked her to knowledge and to awareness of the wider world. And it linked her as well to the learned Judaism of her parents and their parents, in the lost world of Sephardic Rhodes, which the Nazis destroyed at Auschwitz, along with the other Jewish communities of Greece. Her husband isolated her from her family and this background, as did the town and the neighborhood where we lived. Her reading was a pale recollection of the people of the book. That impulse was more compelling, more demanding in me even before I learned to read than it was in the life available to my mother. Perhaps I have been filling her lack, and perhaps I am the recrudescence after

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

the Holocaust and after the sleep of immigration to a baking hot, culturally hollow suburb.

In my eleventh year we moved to a less bereft, and much more Jewish, neighborhood in Los Angeles. The back bedroom of our second-floor apartment was mine. The slim spaces that separated this room from my parents' and from the rest of the apartment were a gulf I enlarged as much as my mind could do. Our building was on a slight rise. Down below my two oblong bedroom windows along the back wall of my room a house was occupied by an unhappy woman and three young children with whom she daily squabbled in her screaming voice. A second wall was a long closet. The other two walls became my library. My dad hung shelves on them that I filled with books I bought when, on Saturdays, I went by bus to the cluster of second-hand bookstores then on Hollywood Boulevard. I had my Milton's poetry and Lamb's essays in the padded, gilt-stamped bindings of American editions of a century before. In between the staggered shelves and on the wall above my small desk, I taped sayings about books and libraries that I typed on card stock. They defined a world that was me—a world much bigger than the one in which I lived, into which I was entering.

Once, with some money I received at a family occasion, I ordered a pile of new books from Blackwell's of Oxford. They were mostly books on political philosophy, which was my passion from ages 13 to 17. One of them was Patrick Gardiner's anthology on the philosophy of history, the subject of my academic work that started about 40 years later. This book had a loose opaque plain wrapper of tissue, like thick onionskin paper, that rustled when I touched it. I vividly hear its whisper still today. I see its crinkling whenever I look at good paper. Much that had gone into constituting my identity folded into its laminate embrace. It was really just cheap paper, but it foretold, like a palimpsest of the future, both my sensual and my mental commitment to doing something with a life of reading books.

On some Saturdays, instead of going to the Hollywood Boulevard bookshops, I took a bus, filled with ladies in hats and gloves riding downtown for department-store shopping, to the very large Los Angeles Central Public Library. I never failed to enter the philosophy department, guarded by twin black basalt statues of Akhenaton and the Oracle of Eleusis, on either side of the stairway to its door. As much as the books, I read the people there. They were a sampling of the various eccentrics, creative

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

geniuses, and cranks with whom Los Angeles was fertile. Old and strange, young and wild, they were part of the busy and consequential intellectual life that grew in that improbable city throughout the twentieth century.

In my last year of high school I was permitted to enroll in courses at the University of California at Los Angeles. In those days there were many eighteenth century books on the open shelves of the stacks. I tracked these from shelf to shelf and from floor to floor, and I even found some seventeenth century books. These added the possibilities of adventures into virtually unlimited texts and time to the sphere of reading I had built from the simply old books I bought for quarters. The childhood emotions that instigated my committed reading included an inner life made passionate by isolation and a range of anxieties. These are not uncommon causes of young people "disappearing" into books. But for certain reasons I preferred to read old books, which I scrounged from the second-hand bookshops and our very large central public library. The enchantment of old books—and old things—in my circumstances generated a view of life as a dichotomy between the inward that endured, to be enjoyed, and the outward that was swept away, to be feared. It became an adventure that has staggered me. I enjoyed it, and still do, though my binaries have softened and blurred; but it does not cease to be a burden and to raise the question of how to understand who I am in the present world while simultaneously forming me into what I have been.

At each of these stages—the beige rocks and lizards of the sandy dry wash in the suburbs, the small-town public libraries my mother and I went to, then the Central Library, the vast research library at UCLA—my reading flowed around obstacles in search of more sophisticated books. As a child I had to beg for permission to go into the "Adult" section of the public library. No one around me shared my interests. In the large libraries my ignorance, however, became more a power than an obstacle, because it freed me to search randomly. This freedom was a rainbow of interests I pursued at will, on my own, way away from the world I lived in. I fixated on the pleasures of reading. These then refracted the splits in myself that left me both an odd child and a somewhat creative person. They line up like this:

staying in	going out
being	doing
universal	particular

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

beautiful	practical
me	the oppressive world
what I want	what serves the larger good
soul	body

My reading preserved something in me that could thrive solely when I was alone, as I saw it. The truth, though, was that I needed to learn much more about having friends and being in groups. I had grown up in quite an isolated way.

But there was a more difficult problem beyond this: the tension between my disincarnated, idealizing self and my physical, social, and sexual self. As thoroughly as I needed to read and loved it, I suspected myself of avoiding responsibilities by reading. And what's worse, the specter of a morally austere Marxism, which I encountered among high school friends, sternly admonished me that I was forgetting the suffering of the undefended. I myself was weak and gentle, just as I imagined the oppressed to be. Yet to join them seemed to be to lose the safety and delicate beauty of the world I read myself into. But I also feared that so much reading withdrew me from the material arts of creative expression (other than writing) and from the moral obligations of citizenship and of humanity.

That world included a pleasurable past but it also included the strife of ideas along the line of conceptualized versions of the split in my affects. Such strife seemed safe, and safer than the strife in my home and in the world at that time. But nevertheless it required a struggle with myself. The accusation by others that I read so much that I was impractical and anti-social contributed to this. Thus I came to feel that who I most *am* was a problem, a dysfunction. This was an inner belief, according to which I reject myself. I could not view a problem that I caused without facing the more unsolvable problem of bookish ill-fitting brainy me. My mother's love of books became my lifelong psychic and existential package of philosophical concerns. As I was soon to enter college, the value of learning that I felt as a Jew had summoned conflicts with a wider import, portending a scholarly agenda but also weighing on me as conflicts for the resolution of which I had one resource. But the conflicts themselves were raveled right into this resource, the adventure and practice of reading.

In college two libraries facing me opened up another dimension of this conflict because the conflict in me had become ready to expand. One was the general library,

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

Sterling, an immense rectangular stone tower topped by steel castellations, with more than twelve million books, and the other was one of the most exquisite rare books and special collections library buildings in the world, the Beinecke Library, the home of massive, foundational collections of American, European, and world culture. My first sight of the Beinecke forever changed me. My old and untutored interest in the physical book instantly became obsession with the materiality of the book, the most powerful transmitter of ideas ever hitherto known. Beyond any scholarly activity, most everything I was learning to want as part of my own set of values had a habitation there. Its glowing walls and shining book tower passed from being the symbol of what I prized to being the substance of it. A short walk away, the sixteen floors of Sterling Library represented for me the ideas themselves that interested me, rather than the cultures that created them and to which I was also committed. I now had two directions, two natures, two tasks: the box and its contents, the book and its text, materiality and ideality, the body and the soul. Although it could not be clearer to me that these two parts of a person fit together, I would not simply live my way through this mystery. I had to think it through. But to think it through I had to read it through. Finding the path of texts, books, and ideas that were to light my way has taken up the last 53 years.

Friday nights after dinner, entering the Sterling stacks, until they closed at 10pm, were delicious. I left my friends in the dining hall and went in alone. Almost no one was there because the weekend had come. Choosing one of the sixteen floors at random and spontaneously selecting an aisle, I turned one of the switches mounted at each end of the range. A row of light bulbs under dark conical shades came on down the aisle and above my head. The light was not too bright—just enough to enable reading and low enough to be cozy. At each shelf I picked, as I read, almost sniffed, the row of back strip titles I made a point of lightly touching or tapping each volume. These gestures invested my flesh along with my mind in the lottery in which I was engaged, despite my pretension to being pure mind. The luck of finding interesting books now became an adventure of color and texture. I sought to be neither reader nor book, but something stretching between the two. My range of reference and sense of possibility met the silent kaleidoscope of authors and ideas in front of me. My eyes became a conduit through which some inner sense I shared with all the text that there is magically moved. There was also an ineffable balance between sheer haphazard

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

and informed intention. Each tap of my finger and each saccadic movement of my eyes challenged the stochastic nature of our existence. It all teetered on the hope that the meaningfulness that I hoped there really is in life would spring to action. As I stepped down the range I prayed for fate to give my rambles the inward meaning I was seeking in the stacks, in college, in the night. After a short while I carried a stack of books to a study desk at the end of each range: a metal desk and a wooden windsor chair to sit in. Each desk stood next to an arched window of leaded colored glass, with a black wrought-iron handle, looking out of the world of reading down to the glittering campus below.

The solitude of the evening freed me to wander the stacks, while parties lit up in the colleges across campus. I sometimes joined them, but not until I had felt the overwhelming bulk of the printed word and, even more keenly, the drive within me to read. With no one looking and no one about and nothing I had to finish that was due in the next hours on those nights, my inner light was unconstrained. Serendipity and godsends could guide it, as if the entire mass of the library spun around and around me, silent and inwardly stationary, until the reading I sought stopped in front of my eyes and at my fingertip. There was, for the moment late on those Friday nights, nothing to worry about; and inner conflicts seemed to have purposes they were working out for the good. Staying inside, rather than going outside, felt like the solution to my sexual, social, and political anxieties, so long as I stayed inside with the reading that seemed to free me from unwelcome demands and helped me to dream and to think.

This favorite position was also a solitary one. I was accustomed to that. Because my family lived in an anti-Semitic suburb when I very young, I had almost no friends until we moved before I entered high school. Yet even then I did not make friends for some years. I both resisted this but also felt lonely. In high school one day a new boy showed up named Peter Csako. His family left Hungary when he was quite young, but everything about him still was exotic. He loved poetry, he had a motorcycle, and he was dashing sexy. This awakened something common to sixteen-year-olds but unfamiliar to me. Off we went on the bike into the hills and read poetry to one another, until adults decided this was dangerous. But he was the first friend I had who loved to read, and this bound us for a short time. Before and after, however, I wondered what exactly one does with a friend, if one’s chief activity was reading? Do

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

the two of you just sit and read in chairs on opposite sides of the lamp on the table between? Is this what people do? I really did not know. As I progressed at college I made more friends but always I insisted on maintaining in their eyes my character as a reader and a thinker, or so it seemed.

Reading had given me, by the time I went to college, the idea that I was self-sufficient. This of course was an illusion. It had helped to give me robust inner resources, it is true. But I drew a false conclusion from the fact. Needing others in a frank and healthy way was alien. Similarly, I was on distant terms with my body. Friends and the body seemed external to the real, core me, which I took to be a reading mind, simply a brain studying through thick glasses. My eyes were the means of connection with the world, but they were focused and shielded, locked in as well, by my eyeglasses. Yet my feeling for the physical book contradicted this view of myself. It betrayed that I wanted contact with material pleasure and beauty. I think that part of the power of the book in Western cultures is that the bound codex is a metonym for the human self as substantially a mind, independent and resistant to damage by some of the forces outside its binding. Digital devices also can represent this. We quickly lose ourselves in them as simulacra of ourselves. On each person's computer there is a file tree that mirrors the mind of its owner. What one knows about, does, and is interested by resides there in some kind of order or disorder. Some file trees are chaotic, others (such as mine) are built as little palaces of classification. In truth, though, even the most rigid file tree fails an ideal of objective perfection, like all attempts at classification. We do not live in rational order, and no rational order protects us from the messiness of our own selves, much less serves as a perfect solipsistic world.

From my start as an intellectual I was suspicious of the metastasis of logic that devotion to rationality bred. My better angel knew that this was delusory. It leads to the desiccation of our spiritual energies, our intellectual depth, our artistic creativity, and our conative moral life. What I thought of as impregnable self-sufficiency, however, tended to push me toward a rationalistic approach to life. This in turn put my own actual resources, abilities, and spirit into conflict with what I saw as the practical world guided by logic. I have spent decades now trying to navigate this problem on the levels of philosophy and history—in terms of the colorful and featureful world of humanity and nature. In trying to do justice to both sides, I have

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

landed very firmly on the side of spirit and feeling over that of objective "reason." Nonetheless, I took from my reading in the rational side an ability to shut out distractions. I can care less on occasion for people's problems than for my reading agenda. This is ghastly, but it is true. A bit of coldness protects one's concentration.

Early in my college years I created two fetishes for my reading. One was a bookmark I bought. It had a clip that I attached to the last few pages of the book or the lower cover of a paperback. The mark itself was two 10-inch long narrow lengths of blue and red tartan, pinked at the tail ends, that were sewn on to a tiny ring looped through the clip. Attaching this to a book was a signal that my reading eye had settled on a fresh object and taken possession of it. I laid the marker at the table of contents when I started and then laid it on the title-page as I finished making notes from the book. Every book I read had to enter my personal sphere through this procedure. I lost the bookmark about twenty years later when I forgot a book in the seat-pocket of an airplane.

The other fetish was my mechanical pencil. It was an ordinary, thick yellow Scripto. I carried it everywhere, but it had a district importance for my reading. On an unlined white three-by-five card stuck into the bookmark clip at the back of a book, I used the pencil to record the page and paragraph number of passages I wanted to note. After finishing the book, I typed up these excerpts. I still have hundreds of pages from those years, on onion-skin paper in binders. And I resumed the practice, transformed into digital records, when I returned to academic life 18 years ago. I have about 2500 pages of such notes in files on my computer, where the search function gives me access to what my memory alone cannot retain. The pencil simply stopped advancing lead after a couple of decades, but I still have it in a drawer.

These fetishes were bodily and material instruments of work, but they also were props in creating my character. I desperately needed to grow roots for myself, as I entered the university world I'd aimed at where I had none. But, like others in my family, I was struggling to expand out of the fears and depressing drift that my grandparents' children fell into as the ancient religious coherence of the Jewish quarters of Warsaw, Rhodes, and Istanbul ceased to sustain their psyches. In my new environment, I was an absolute bumpkin. All I had that meant anything was reading —and that, at least, I had from my ancestors. But it was mine, not theirs; and as mine it was rather unlike the reading going on in the collegiate world around me. Each

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

book I read became a root for myself, tangling with the other roots I frantically laid into my mind. The more I read and thought about the world, the more I felt I was my own creation. There was, and is, no other choice for me. Whatever I have to offer comes from this effort to fashion my existence through using my reading to pull out the innate dispositions of my mind and to join the world. I have not found my path to be so much one of searching for answers I do not have as of laying hands on answers I already know. This does not make the search less hard. One must still love the questions themselves more than the answers. It was in reading that I could be solitary to a degree sufficient for thinking in this way. Reading had always been "staying in," as opposed to "going out," in the highest and most satisfying degree. But this also means that reading can be for me a mask vacuum-sealed over my issues and conflicts. Their contours are evident exactly because the mask to hide them so closely fits.

If reading began as defensiveness or as withdrawal from practical matters, I feared that it must then always mark fault, disconnection, or the core wound? And if one's reading is permanently dyed with this coloring, did this mean the reading does nothing to help? The issue is more one of thinking than of reading: what matters is how what one learns from reading frees and expands one's thinking. Thought that is too rigidly tied to ideal logic or on the contrary, too tethered to immediate concrete horizons will increase the feelings of isolation and oppression from which an obsessive reader seeks relief. In the course of abstract thought, each step up the ontological escalator becomes necessary to solve theoretical problems, but the world of existence starts to disappear in the quest for absolute truth. And misplaced concreteness means one might as well read nothing but technical manuals, for the freedom and richness of the mind, to which no better road has been found than that of reading, is lost if everything is constrained by the immediate. Next to the freedom of the mind, only freedom of the heart is more important. Reading frees the heart, too, because the heart responds so sensitively to direct impressions that it will seek a vista beyond the present. Some media theorists have come to say that reading is a compulsion—that the practice of reading as developed since the deployment of printing technologies in Europe is a compulsive disorder. This is true only of reading that is not accompanied by thinking. We must think about what we feel, about what we know, and about our own thoughts. But developing that kind of thinking beyond one's one experiences requires a form of perception that goes farther than one's own

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

orbit. That form of perception we have localized in a specific training of sight. Whatever the problems or the limits from which we each start, we need a way past them. Call reading a crutch. But we each need it, no matter how failing or parochial our start, in order to find a road.

After college I continued only partway through graduate school. By this point, one use of my reading was as a research skill. I knew how to read catalogs and bibliographies so as to find books and articles, how to read books and articles so as to find more books and articles, and how to read these so as to pinpoint thoughts and expressions I wanted to use. My little mechanical pencil was always busy scratching references that I fastidiously typed. Reading for me became, in a sense, reading of the world of text rather than the reading of texts. And this meant the world of print, the whole era of the printed book.

But even I could see that the printed codex was staggering under the weight of the text and information it was harnessed to carry to everyone who wanted any of it at any place or time. This state of affairs was gravid with a new form of text, data, and imagery, just as the horsepower limitations of an engine give birth to newer and more powerful engines. The machine's needs seem to motivate human production of machines as much as do human needs. Nowhere was this clearer than in the emergence of digital technology, and nowhere was the power of the digital more intrusive into the slow traditions of the analog than in the sphere of books and the keeping and using of them through librarianship. As librarians had always been the ontologists of knowledge, inventing taxonomies of its forms, so they were at the center of the dawning new questions about the storage, dissemination, and retrieval of information. The hard drive was the first new form of storage since the codex replaced the roll early in the Common Era, the internet disseminated text and images in ways that led people to want more completely pervasive and accessible dissemination than we had ever known, and hyper data allows the most powerful means of retrieval of information as the hyper-powered culmination of a millennium of laboriously laying the foundations of indexing.[1]

This frees us to look at print in ways unconstrained by its utility for us. We can see it more critically and more deeply. How did it shape our culture and our thinking? Why did the codex book become such a powerful token of our agency? I sensed that my absorption in print now might yield meaningfulness beyond my own inward form

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

of life, if somehow I had found in my loneliness on the suburban dry river wash a secret correspondence with the foundation of the modern world, or with the mighty structure of philosophical ideas that had fascinated me since childhood, or—most extravagantly—with something basic in the projection of the shadow of our egos onto the world, endowing objects with the values we create and seeking from those objects the certification and reinforcement and even the validation of our judgments.

For purposes such as these, as yet but vaguely conceived, and certainly just because I loved to be around books, I then went to the only library school in the United States that offered study in the history of printing and the book. By focusing on the materiality of the book and on the sociality of communications through print, my eyes became much more modern than they had been. My thinking grew less isolated, I learned new ways to interpret words and ideas. Over time I was able to look at the non-print means of communications we use, such as moving imagery and the reproduction of sound, in ways in which I saw myself in the modern world as actor as well as dissenter. A more complete and skilled critic, I started to see the homologies of text reproduced by print with other technologies of reproduction as both historical development and as structure of intersubjectivity and life in common.

I also started to take tremendous pleasure in the materiality of the book in far more intricate and interesting ways than I ever had. Although I simply enjoyed old books from quite an early age, it was hard for me to be very frank about sensual pleasure. As I have said, sensual pleasure had stood in opposition to intellectual work as a lower order of experience. Throughout college I moved more and more deliberately away from my feelings about old things, regarding these feelings as untutored and simplistic, in favor of the texts themselves in any printed form. And it was not even the full text, as language, rhetoric, and culture, but merely as a delivery device for "ideas." Nevertheless, I had not lost the thrill that connecting ideas to one another across eras and media had given me. I learned some of this from my free way of wandering library stacks. Paintings moved me very much when I was young, and the cultures of my generation seemed to me to be among the most important things in life while I was in university. But the dry rigor of argument threatened to deprive me of this openness. It was leaving graduate school for a career in antiquarian books that preserved and enlarged such breadth of mind as I have.

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

For about 30 years after rare-books school I was continually involved in handling old books and manuscripts, for a couple of years at first as a cataloguer of a private collection, but then as a dealer. I started by thinking of first and early editions of philosophical texts as a way of connecting what I had to do to earn a living, having not finished graduate school, with what the ideas I cared about, but very quickly I found that it was ideas in their full embodiment that I most loved. I passionately desired to know them in their full historical dress, connected not only to their own times but also livingly to the later times of those who took them up for themselves and their different circumstances. Also, very powerfully as well as very quickly, I started attending to the illustrations in old books. I learned to trace the ideas that pictures expressed. And after not much more time I began to see bindings, even, in this light, as expressive signifiers of culture, including ideas and passions. In effect, as a reader I now was reading every aspect of texts and books. In these ways I was combining sensual pleasure with my intellectual interests in ways that served the interdisciplinary freedom that came naturally to me. Academia still tries to beat this out of me.

In approaching both historical work and philosophy, separately and in combination, it is the evolution of such issues as these out from my own psyche that I pursue. No matter how dense the scholarly carapace, it is the inner formation, congenital and lived, that is the truest substance and the most pointed purpose of intellectual work. They are the elements of striving for understanding at a level so deep that it underlies all our work as scholars. They are our highest-order motivations, at or approaching the sacred, without which indeed there would be no scholars. This dimension of scholarship, even when it is expressed in ways we like to label primitive, is essential to justifying what we do. There is a place in this world for the simple, primitive willingness to believe and to focus one's beliefs on issues or objects that conduct us to the sacred and the sacred to us. In all good philosophy there is such first-person philosophy, despite the prejudices of the discipline. This memoir that you are reading is a practice of first-person philosophy. It excavates the affects that commit me to the work and traces their private life.

I attribute improved integration of the mental and the material sides of life as a thinker to my training and practice in rare books. As a rare book dealer, I specialized in early printed books. Virtually everything I did in the course of those decades

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

concerned trying to grasp how an idea, being immaterial and inward, fits into the communicative discourse of print culture, which, being technological, mechanical, commercial, and social, was the material means of communicating ideas. From this eventually a research agenda appeared, that of renegotiating the boundaries between morality and history, as an advanced form of the problem of the relation of ideas to their social and material contexts. Finding a nexus between morality and history has been my form of much larger philosophical issues, notably in the shape that phenomenology, existentialism, and other movements have put them as the question of the relation between truth and being—conceiving truth in terms of the changing, plural manifold that truth both describes but also seems to stand apart from. Thus for me reading continued to be the way I study meaningful moral and philosophical questions, sometimes serving to translate my personal conflicts into ontological concepts.

I was fortunate in entering book history studies at the moment of its spurt from a gentleman's club hobby to a foundational discipline in the humanities. The materiality of the communication of ideas is now part of all good intellectual and social history. But its purchase goes even further, for the basic concepts of hermeneutics involve understanding the technologies and practices of verbal and other communications. As Roger Chartier put it, referring to both images and texts:

The question of the inherent force of the figure—of reproduction and of the reproduction of reproductions—is thus situated at the crossroads of the history of technology, the history of knowledge, and political history.[2]

Philosophers continue to argue in circles about the relation of history and context to concepts and their logic.[3] There is a yet wider effect, for the concept of historicity —the idea developed by Dilthey, Heidegger, and others that has been and remains at the core of understanding the human situation in my work and that of a great philosophers and theorists of culture—turns on the relationship between the spiritual and the material sides of our existence.[4]

Reading, just mere reading, always raises for me very many tough tangled problems. This is because there is a core problem in my lived experience of reading: some failure that comes out of my core wound, although mine is no more complex than anyone else's. That the troubles I share with most everyone should have become for me this bramble of ideas that must assert themselves and be addressed through the

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

trained co-ordination of eyesight and conceptual activity is a source of frustration, wonder, and joy.

I have said little so far about reading for pleasure, as distinct from enjoying the materiality of the codex book. This might serve to distinguish my thoughts from those of others on the subject of reading. It is tied, as I have said, to intellectual issues that I feel compelled to investigate. Now, it might be that this compulsion is entirely unnecessary, even neurotic. I am far from the clearest person one will meet, though I do endeavor to keep matters in as clear a sight as I can muster. But indeed it may be that had I not the insecurities that do drive me I would have a less complicated and intellectualized relationship to reading and to life in general. However, none of us escapes the profundities of existence; and there seems little value to avoiding reflection on these. For even if one can avoid such struggle and slide safely into eternal sleep, there is not much good one can do for others without having built up inner knowledge. If we are not put here to help one another but merely to slip past anything troubling, then the spiritual traditions of humankind all err.

While many of my most satisfying academic adventures have come from the practice of close reading of conceptually intricate texts, I almost always read a novel as well. I can often enough take the same pleasures intellectual stimulation from the thinking a great or very good novelist has done. I take many other kinds of pleasure, too, from novels—pleasure in the representation of human life just for its own sake. I read history for pleasure and for stimulation both.

In antiquarian book selling, I had to read constantly. I read hundreds of sale catalog pages most days. I read in the old books I owned and sold. I read library and collection catalog entries about them. I read books about these books, their authors, their ideas, their printers, their typefaces, their milieus, their bibliographic histories. This was not only the predatory reading I learned in university. It was a group of skills sharply particularized to choosing books from the tens of thousands that the trade offers every day that interested me and that I could sell. It was also for the purpose of following threads of evidence with which to build a historical account of all aspects of the book object on my desk before me: why someone printed it where and when they printed it, why the author wrote it when they did, why readers throughout its life read it, what the text meant and what this instantiation of the text signifies, what the illustrations (if any) do and their often intricate history, what the

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

binding expresses—and to tie all these lines of inquiry together into one glowing, illuminating object from the past.

But at a certain point in this career my own reading stopped. Neither for pleasure nor for reflection would I be able to take up a book for several months on end, in repeated bouts of abstraction and restless distraction. Under the smooth yellow light of my favorite reading lamp, which I'd bought at a New Haven junk store in freshman year and kept until just a few years ago, I lay on my stomach with a book. But I could do little other than flip pages. The rest of the time I was busy professionally and socially. But I was disengaged from what, apart from my closest friendships, had always most mattered to me. My years of seeing reading from the point of view of the bookseller who needed to use the very particular perspective of the antiquarian dealer, many of whose understanding is both really deep and yet terribly superficial, uniquely knowledgeable but facile, had taken me too far from the engagement for fun and for reflection that my good reading brought me. There was something as yet unthought in me, or at least unexpressed, that was forming during this distressing period: something stronger connected books, texts, bodies, souls, and myself with the world that I did not yet understand. In the end it turned out to be a view of what a moral life could be. I wanted to seek this by thinking, but if I cannot read well I do not think well. Academia then seemed the best, if not the only, way to erect a life of reflective reading. I strongly desired to teach. It took me another decade to escape my taxing bookselling career, which was always further ahead than I could grasp or further behind than I could bear. Changing careers required changing many more parts of my life. Over the two subsequent decades I have sunk a few roots into the modest spot in the academy I now occupy. It is precarious, a ledge for curled digits and toes, and frustrating as well; but it is as much like what suits me at this point as I can hope for. Nonetheless, my passion keeps growing.

The last 18 years of my life have been a massive reading project. I have pressed all this reading as hard as I can in order to drive my thinking and writing. It seemed to me that I had decades of theory and thought to catch up on and that I must do so in the service of excogitating whatever was in me that begged for expression during the increasingly unsatisfying years of my book selling. Reading catalogues, reading the book as a material or even as a spiritual object, reading texts as glowing spinning globes of the kairotic moments of a thinker's life or of her cultural world did not

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

suffice to take me into the heart of the puzzle of human moral life that I wanted to penetrate. From my earliest days of self-consciousness, I had felt as much cut off from our common moral life as a part of it. That is to say, I felt both cut off and included, about equally. Each made the other more difficult to bear by being in opposition or at least as a distraction. Each seemed to endanger the value of the other. Something in my conceptual thinking was awry, unresolved, for it seemed to me that thinking should not isolate me. But whether this apparently necessary reaction of separation from concrete reality was inherent to conceptual thought, or to thinking inwardly at all, or to the inward pleasures of reading, or whether the deeper harmony of self and world and of abstraction and the concrete manifold of our human existence waiting to be found was not yet clear to me.

And so I must read. For all the previous half-century of reading I had done, I never read as much as I have in the last 18 years. I became a promiscuous reader: if anything suggested to me promises to speak intelligently, whether history, poetry, politics, fiction or philosophy, about the complex issues obsessing me, or about these in the forms they take in the frightful political life we now endure, or will illuminate life with the beauty and passion of good or great art, I will read it.

The ambition to muscle all that I read into the problems I work on, and to produce my own writing out of them, historical as well as philosophical, has produced a problem. I scan academic papers and even books for whatever will add to the tower of seductive phrases and idea-glimmers that I am amassing. I brutally exclude the *adiaphora*, disdaining whatever does not directly point to that which I am motivated to include as puritanically as a Calvinist attacking a Roman church. This means that I miss a great deal. In a sense, I am deliberately narrowing my thinking precisely as a necessary part of deepening it. How do I calculate the weight of such loss and such gain? My purposes are important, and my time might be short. My ambition is great, but the ideal I inwardly hold to and the demands of public expression often contradict each other. How much more widely can I think? Ought I to remain open to revolutionize my whole orientation by rethinking it on the basis of every argument in the world that passes my way? Can I think anew from the bottom up? Or shall I simply follow out the inevitable unquiet disposition that has escorted me through all these decades? When you have never seen the land toward which you navigate, you

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

do not always know whether you have gone too far or not far enough. In the case of a spiritual voyage, we have only the still small voice. But it speaks with authority.

To be so inner-directed also brings other challenges. A round peg battering itself to break into a square hole ends up bruised and rather alone. The party is not here but over there, where the square pegs enjoy their square situations. My thinking has been guided by my direct experiences of life translated through my reading in philosophy, history, and culture, but very little directed by disciplinary restrictions, training within a tradition, or by the demands of employers. Under any circumstances of upbringing, I might well have been introspective by disposition. I know that I am not as introverted as those around me when I was young convinced me I was, but my congenital attitude has always been deliberative or meditative. Reading matches such a character as one wedding ring matches another. But could I, would I have read differently? Combined my reading with a more publicly or physically active life, had something different slid into place in my first and loneliest years? Due to contingencies, I have had relatively few colleagues' and yet those to whom I have been close enough to share both ideas and feelings have helped me to grow into a far better thinker than I started out to be.

Somehow my own troubles and adventures have, nevertheless, cooperated with the jinn that silently helps my reading with sufficient success so as, at long last, to soften my faults of disconnection from others and fearfulness of the world and of the common and collective. For there is in the end no reason to go where reading can take one if one does not have a sense of the purpose of all this, which is the well-being of human persons. I have often been tempted, especially when I was quite young, to disappear into the past, or into a fictional world—in my case, not science fiction but something less analogous to real life and its troubles—or into very abstruse studies. I knew a scholar who spent four decades annotating a few years of the collected letters of Horace Walpole. This was "nothing," he said, "of any interest" to others. It is not, of course, true that Walpole's letters are uninteresting. Nothing could be livelier than that brilliant queen in his element. And even that kind of scholarship benefits humankind. But the attitude he described of enveloping oneself in the thick warm comfort blankets of a form of life lost in the past, with its own colors and adventures, often appealed to me, as it does to others. But that I did not follow in his footsteps must attest to some other drive in me.

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1400

Just as it was my studious, close-reading ancestors who wordlessly inspired me, through the pale medium of my mother's frustrated reading obsessions, so too these forebears implanted another purpose. This is how I now see the matter. It has the express shape of a print, slightly colorized, of a portrait of my maternal great-grandfather. He lived in the Ghetto of Rhodes. I look like him. Although he was not a rabbi or a scholar, everything about the moral purpose of study appears in the lines of his face. These lines are laid deep within me. They made it impossible over the long run to turn away from community, much less from my own need for the love of friends. Currently, the confluence of morality, which requires categorical laws, with the historical, which is changeful and contingent, brings together my two oldest and greatest intellectual passions: moral philosophy and philosophy of history. Both are social and public: history ought always be about collectives and the other, and morality is always about others within and outside one's collectives.

So now I have, to some extent, resolved binaries. The concept most useful in these resolutions, that of the interdependence of all life, did not come to me through reading. It occurred to me, instead, in a museum when looking at a piece of Asante carving that expressed this idea. So what kind of reading is forwarding my thinking by its inward action?

Despite its inwardness, my long habits of reading more and more stimulate my response to the problems that I see now setting the world aflame, after a long life in which I with many others thought we were close to quenching the sparks at many points over the decades. While I will read a wide range of views, my inner direction guides me to that in which I ought most to engage. My experiences in life and recent movements in theory have bolstered my commitment to philosophical personalism, which has become the center of my work as historian and philosopher. I see personalism as the strongest, most robust path to understanding the interdependence of human persons with one another and of humankind with the living world. I discovered personalism through my unceasing interest in all corners of the history of ideas, and I have come to understand it in terms of contemporary crises just because reading itself calls me into thinking and engaging. It no longer isolates me. My practices for taking time simply to think by myself satisfy my monastic urges and at the same time amplify the importance of the reading that fuels my reflection.

From about age 13 I feared that if I am reading and thinking more, then I might be heading more deeply into the core dangers I used to fear from reading and thinking: its reflection of feelings about myself, its capacity to debilitate my need to act as a moral agent, and to disable my search for affection and acceptance that drives my interest in moral action. And yet reading has never quite taken me past the boundary but instead has always herded me back into a richer life. I think that this is because reading itself is one of the most deeply humanistic and humane activities we can do. In my life reading has seen me through periods of utter intellectual naiveté and of deep close reading, through periods of my shut-in tendencies and of my most strident politics, and through grief and joy, love and heartbreak, illness and health. There is something in it that my mind deeply needs, whether in the compact codex or in the infinite scrolling screen. And reading has returned the favor by never letting me get quite lost.

_Endnotes

1 On the development of the index by printing, see Giancarlo Abbamonte and Craig Kallendorf, "On Indexing: The Birth and Early Development of an Idea," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 84, no. 3 (2023): 465–486. Doi: 10.1353/jhi.2023.a901490; and on its development in digital media as well as its history: David Duncan, *Index, A History of the: A Bookish Adventure from Medieval Manuscripts to the Digital Age* (New York: Norton, 2022).

2 Roger Chartier, "Introduction," in *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Roger Chartier (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 231–233. One of the foundational works at the time was D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

3 See, for example, Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

4 The early history of the concept is traced in Leonhard von Renthe-Fink, *Geschichtlichkeit: Ihr terminologischer und begrifflicher Ursprung bei Hegel, Haym, Dilthey und Yorck* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968). The term is now common throughout the social sciences. A good recent discussion is Augusto de Carvalho, "The Meanings of Historicity—the End and the Beginning," Geschichtstheorie am Werk (blog), September 20, 2022, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/7934>. See also my "Repairing Historicity," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2020): 54–75, <http://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/881/1523>.