
Response to the Presidential Address

READING THAT TRANSFORMS

Kevin Gary
Valparaiso University

I want to begin by saying how much I enjoyed reading Bryan's paper, which is somewhat ironic given that he cautions against such pleasure-taking. As I read this essay, as well as others by Bryan, I am reminded of Dorothy Sayers's essay on the "lost tools of learning," which included grammar, logic, and rhetoric, or the Trivium, as it was once referred to.¹ Before taking on the Quadrivium, or the subjects, students had to first excel at the Trivium. Like a musician incessantly practicing scales and chords, the rules of grammar (proper syntax, punctuation, etc.) were inscribed in students so as to become second nature. Once proficient with this tool, students were then introduced to logic (inductive and deductive reasoning, fallacies, and so on), becoming adept at building sound arguments and astute at spying out specious ones. Yet as important as grammar and logic, or the soundness of what was said, was the form and manner, or how something was said. This was the focus of the third tool: rhetoric. Students were taught to express themselves not only correctly and truthfully, but also beautifully and persuasively.

Bryan deftly employs all three tools. With clear, graceful prose, he conversationally knits together a series of powerful premises in support of his overarching thesis, all the while anticipating and responding to probable rejoinders. As a writer, he is skilled at making opaque and difficult topics seem simple, resisting the jargon creep that is so prevalent in philosophical and educational discourse. However, Bryan's masterful rhetoric, enjoyable as it is, unwittingly runs counter to his larger argument. He uses pleasurable rhetoric to critique pleasurable rhetoric. To serve his larger purpose, he perhaps should have used abstruse and labored prose—but then who would read his paper? Reading Bryan I am reminded of those gifted teachers who make students feel smarter than they really are, yet in so doing indirectly call them to a higher plane of learning and living.

My aim in this response is threefold. First, I will examine further the kinds of readers that emerge in Bryan's essay, exploring in particular the moral reader that Bryan endorses. Second, I will consider the pedagogical challenges involved with cultivating morally engaged readers. Towards this end, I turn to art historian Joanna Ziegler for an example of a pedagogical practice that

¹ Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning: Paper Read at a Vacation Course in Education, Oxford 1947* (London: Methuen, 1948), Project Gutenberg Canada e-book, <http://www.gutenberg.ca/ebooks/sayers-lost/sayers-lost-00-h.html>.

gestures in this direction. Finally, I hope to save Bryan from killing his mother out of a concern for Justice.

THE PLEASURE READER

Brian offers three cogent criticisms of the love of reading rationale: (1) it draws us to only read texts that are pleasurable, (2) seeking pleasure we are then prone to shirk or fail to appreciate the hard work that critical reading requires, and (3) pulled into the love of reading, especially schlock, we can forgo other valuable learning experiences. To the question, “Why should we read?” Bryan proposes a two-fold alternative: first, we should emphasize the love of learning. If successful, Bryan is hopeful that students who love to learn “will probably read more substantive books in more critical and creative ways.” Second, we should encourage reading because it is a morally good thing to do. Again, Bryan is hopeful that young people will be “motivated to do something because they think it is the right thing to do.”

While I agree wholeheartedly with Bryan’s critique of the love of reading rationale, I am less optimistic about his counter-proposal. First, and Bryan acknowledges this, the “love of learning” rationale is susceptible to same critique as the love of reading is. Second, while I share his overall aim to heighten the moral implications of reading, I do not share his confidence that young people will be drawn to reading because they think it is right thing to do. The moral impetus he summons forth is outward-focused: We should read because it connects us in intelligent ways to other people and the world—it is “tied to a sense of social contribution...” While this outward focus is important, it is only part of the motivational story. Moreover, this summons does not adequately equip young readers against the lure of pleasure that Brian is contending against. While we might reach their intellect, perhaps convincing them of the moral value there is in reading, their will often lags behind, and their desires lag even further behind.

Bryan’s argument against the love of reading as an educational aim is grounded in a larger concern for an education that cultivates morally engaged students—students who take seriously what Søren Kierkegaard describes as the ceaseless task of becoming a self. Often, consciously or unconsciously, we evade or ignore this task. In this tendency Kierkegaard observes a way of living—a common default setting—that he describes as the aesthetic sphere or modality, contrasting this with the ethical and religious sphere. While Kierkegaard’s ethicist and religious person takes on, with eyes wide open, the task of self-hood, aesthetes—often with eyes wide shut—shirk this task.

Kierkegaard’s spheres or modalities are sometimes referred to as stages, which is misleading, for it suggests a linear or steady progression through these stages. Rather, the spheres are always concurrent possibilities. We can oscillate from one to the next at any given moment—pulled towards helping a friend in need or drawn to binge watching the entire *Breaking Bad* series in a week. The self never arrives at a point of stasis, but rather is always striving, always on the way, always struggling, either becoming an actualized

self or running from this task. Kierkegaard's anthropology calls into question the stability suggested by Aristotle's virtuous person.

Each of the spheres is characterized by a dialectical and existential tension: pleasure versus boredom for the aesthete; responsibility versus guilt for the ethicist; and faith versus absurdity for the religious. More than anything aesthetes despise boredom, craving constant amusement and distraction. This preoccupying pursuit of pleasure and ease leads to a moral evasion that may happen unawares or perhaps there was an awareness that was long ago obscured. Comedian Louis C.K. shares an illustration of this blindness when going to pick up a friend's cousin at the Port Authority bus station in New York City. Arriving from a sheltered and rural setting, his friend's cousin had never been to a city. As they are walking out of the bus terminal, Louis relates the following story: "She [the cousin] passed this homeless guy, and she sees him. I mean, we all passed him, but she *saw* him. She is the only one who actually saw him . . . and my cousin was like, 'So? He's supposed to be there. Come on, let's go.'"² The aesthetic modality is, no doubt, a coping mechanism, as living with the ethical strain of infinite responsibility for the Other is too much to bear 24/7. Yet for the aesthete this evasion, this flight from the self and moral responsibility, becomes a lifestyle.

Renton, the major protagonist of the film *Trainspotting*, who is by the way a heroin addict, powerfully captures this outlook when reflecting on the bromides of popular culture:

Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family, Choose a fucking big television, Choose washing machines, cars . . . dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin? People think it's all about misery and desperation and death and all that shite, which is not to be ignored, but what they forget is the pleasure of it. Otherwise we wouldn't do it. After all, we're not fucking stupid. At least, we're not that fucking stupid. Take the best orgasm you ever had, multiply it by a thousand and you're still nowhere near it.³

Renton's musings powerfully capture, in stark fashion, the aesthetic modality, also capturing its disturbing insularity and entanglement. The aesthete desires immediacy, passion, living in the moment, yet underneath this is the avoidance

² Louis C.K., "Port Authority of New York," YouTube video, <http://youtu.be/tbR8A27sxg8>.

³ John Hodge, *Trainspotting*, screenplay based on the novel by Irvine Welsh, <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Trainspotting.html>.

of becoming a self—the desire to escape the self. In choosing not to choose life, and in choosing heroin, Renton is essentially not making a choice, an ethically significant choice that is. The marginal selfhood he has seeks to escape into a state of oblivion. For what else is there? Emergence of an ethical self requires commitment to something greater than the self— acknowledgment of what Charles Taylor describes as “horizons of significance” that determine what is important.⁴

So what do Louis C.K., heroine addiction, and Kierkegaard’s aesthete have to do with reading? The problems associated with pleasure reading, the principal target of Brian’s critique, are part of a much deeper problem with the self. The love of reading rationale, as Bryan well notes, plays into the self’s propensities for evading the task of selfhood. This flight, this multitasking, this flitting from one thing to the next, betrays a deeper angst.

Mark Edmundson’s dismay about his students describing “the Oedipus complex and the death drive as being interesting and enjoyable to contemplate” is symptomatic of this aesthetic attitude, which is perhaps more pervasive in our times where we are, more than ever, “distracted from distraction by distraction.”⁵ The ethical significance that perhaps ought to be awakened when considering the death drive or the plight of Oedipus is trumped by artist, aesthetic considerations—a mindset on the look-out for amusement.

THE CRITICAL READER

From one vantage point the aesthete appears to be lazy, resisting what is difficult, always taking the path of least resistance. The Academy’s response is to move us beyond pleasure towards the development of critical reading, countering the thoughtless consumer-pleasure driven self with the serious, critical thinking self. Critical readers, in contrast to pleasure readers, are able to persist with difficult texts; they are adept summarizing, analyzing, and deconstructing texts. Such readers, as Bryan describes them, are able to appraise texts “from a perch of scholarly detachment.” Yet this critical work is not moral work. Though busy and industrious, critical pursuits can be yet another form of moral evasion, albeit a more sophisticated one. The scientist may be as morally immature as the addict—or maybe more so given the science of addiction.

What is needed, argues Kierkegaard, is an ability to read for moral edification. I recall this kind of reading hinted at by one of my college English professors, when he held up the text we were analyzing—Shakespeare’s *King Lear*—and exclaimed with some exasperation, “You do not judge the text; the text judges you and finds you lacking.” In recollection, I recall that he was reacting to our sophomoric questions, which boiled down to that wearisome query we often hear from students, “What is the point?” Alasdair MacIntyre,

⁴ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 39.

⁵ T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (1943; repr., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 18.

when confronted with the question, “What is the point of a liberal arts education?” once wryly quipped, “The point is so that you never ask that question again!”⁶ While perhaps not a satisfying response in this age of accountability and measurement, MacIntyre and my professor’s rejoinder alludes to a different kind of reader and a different kind of reading—one that is more than just critical.

Considering critical reading, author Flannery O’Connor often notes an impatience for “the Instant Answer.”⁷ Stories in English classes “become a kind of literary specimen to be dissected.”⁸ Imagining one of her own stories taught from an anthology O’Connor conjures up an image of a frog being sliced up “with its little organs laid open.”⁹ Something, she laments, “has gone wrong in the process when, for so many students, the story becomes simply a problem to be solved, something which you evaporate to get Instant Enlightenment.”¹⁰ Seeking direct illumination, O’Connor’s prospective readers often ask, “‘What is the theme of your story?’ and they expect [her] to give them a statement [like]: ‘The theme of my story is the economic pressure of the machine on the middle class’—or some such absurdity. And when they’ve got a statement like that, they go off happy and feel it is no longer necessary to read the story.”¹¹

O’Connor’s critique exposes a potential weakness of the critical reader. Like the pleasure reader, the critical reader can be just as morally evasive, holding moral concerns in critical abeyance. Yet what does the moral reader, or primitive reader as Kierkegaard describes her, look like?¹² For one, there is a capacity for solitude, for quiet, and the ability to focus for a sustained period of time—qualities our aesthetic appetites work against. This kind of person has the ability to contend with and prevail over boredom. Bertrand Russell says that “a generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little people . . . unduly divorced from the slow processes of nature, in whom every vital impulse withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase.”¹³ Yet it

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre and Joseph Dunne, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 2 (2001): 5. The exact quote from MacIntyre reads as follows: “Students who ask about their academic disciplines, ‘But what use are they to us after we leave school?’ should be taught that the mark of someone who is ready to leave school is that they no longer ask that question.”

⁷ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977): 184.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 5, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 263.

¹³ Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930; repr., New York: Routledge, 2006), 41.

is also includes a vigilance that not only fights our desire for immediacy but also resists the restive critical mind, which is greedy for resolution and categorization.

THE CONTEMPLATIVE READER

Still how do we cultivate more than pleasure reading or critical reading? Kierkegaard cautions against proceeding directly, as coming on too strong or didactically is often dismissed by the aesthete. Art professor Joanna Ziegler experienced this challenge acutely when teaching art.¹⁴ As Paul Valéry is reported to have said, “To see is to forget the name of the thing one sees.”¹⁵ Students, critically informed, learn to name and categorize the art before them; or aesthetically informed, they gravitate towards art they find pleasing, amusing, entertaining. Both tendencies resist an encounter with the art or a profound beholding of what is before them: the first keeps the subject at arm’s length, like O’Connor’s dissected frog; the second only sees what it wants to see, turning away from what is too difficult or unpleasant.

To counter these proclivities, Ziegler gave her students three paintings to choose from in a local museum. Each week, for thirteen weeks, the students were required to visit their painting, sit in the same place, at the same time, and view it for at least an hour. Each week they had to submit a five-page paper about what they saw: “thirteen weeks, thirteen papers in all—each essentially the same, but reworked, refined, and rewritten.” The students were not to consult any outside sources, but rather to see for themselves.

The assignment, as you can imagine, was resisted by the students, yet over time Ziegler noticed the students’ essays transformed

from personalized, almost narcissistic, responses to descriptions firmly grounded in the picture. Descriptions evolved from being fraught with willful interpretation, indeed selfishness (students actually expressed hostility at being made to go the Museum once a week), to revealing some truth about the painting on its own terms. Most importantly, students developed a personal relationship with what became known as “my” work of art. It was a work they knew by heart, could describe from memory—brushstroke, color change, and subtlety of surface texture. Through repeated, habitual, and direct experience (not working from slides or photographs but confronting the real work of art), students were transformed from superficial spectators . . . into skilled,

¹⁴ Joanna Ziegler, “Practice Makes Reception: The Role of Contemplative Ritual in Approaching Art,” in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 2001): 31–42.

¹⁵ Unsourced quotes attributed to Paul Valéry, Wikiquote, accessed April 14, 2015, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Paul_Val%C3%A9ry.

disciplined beholders with a genuine claim to a deep and intimate knowledge of a single work of art—and they knew it.¹⁶

Ziegler's aim with this assignment was for the students to become "practiced beholders." For this to begin to take hold, a routine and a ritual—a practice—needed to be established. This practice enabled them to "enter into a work of art as a thing in its own right."¹⁷

The painting, approached in this way, was no longer seen as a mere object or image to be looked at, but rather as an icon that looks at us. More than we gaze at or address an icon, it addresses us; such icons, as Jean-Luc Marion explains, are saturated phenomenon. "My transcendental ego cannot anticipate it, nor can my concept contain or comprehend it. My horizons are overwhelmed and submerged by it. I am more the subject constituted by its givenness than it is the object constituted by my subjectivity."¹⁸

To such phenomena we return again and again for insight, for purpose, for enlightenment, for transformation. Saturated texts are far more than instruments that contribute to our personal or moral development. Like dear friends, we are drawn to them and we love them not simply because they flatter or amuse, although they may very well do that, but rather because they confront and challenge us, they call forth our best selves. I am not sure I have the courage to assign the contemplative and demanding task that Ziegler gives to her students. There is so much to do, so much to cover, so many standards, and yet, I know, so much will be forgotten, except that which is beheld.

Returning to Bryan's melancholic postscript, I would contend that Bryan's love for Emerson, Tolstoy, and Plato need not be censured, for I suspect he is not a prodigal lover but rather a demanding one; one who is careful about what is worthy of his heart's affection. I would venture to say that while Bryan may not love reading for reading's sake, he does love particular books . . . good books—not for their rhetorical delights, but for their transformative power.

¹⁶ Ziegler, "Practice Makes Reception," 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31–42.

¹⁸ Merold Westphal, "Transfiguration as Saturated Phenomenon," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 1, no. 1 (2003): 26.
