Presidential Address

AGAINST THE "LOVE OF READING" AS AN EDUCATIONAL AIM

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> Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?
> Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
> Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
>
> Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
> You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
> You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
> You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
> You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.
>
> —*Walt Whitman*[1]

Many people believe that education should instill the "love of reading." In scholarly literature and popular education writing, educators are insistent that students should see that "reading gives pleasure."[2] Others flatly claim, "It's the job of schools to make reading entertaining and motivating" and that schools, furthermore, should "help students associate reading with pleasure."[3] In some of the scholarly literature, the fact that some language arts teachers do not themselves "love to read" is taken as a serious problem in teacher education.[4] Writing in the *Atlantic* magazine, one set of researchers defends reading for pleasure in an article entitled "The Most Important Lesson

[1] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007): 22.
[2] Steven W. Simpson, "The Two Book Trick: Teaching Love of Reading," *Education News*, March 20, 2005, accessed July 16, 2014, http://www.educationnews.org/articles/the-two-book-trick-teaching-love-of-reading-.html.
[3] Marie Carbo and Robert W. Cole, "Nurture the Love of Reading and Test Scores," *Education Digest* 61, no. 4 (1995): 63.
[4] Kimberly Gomez, "Teachers of Literacy, Love of Reading, and the Literate Self: A Response to Ann Powell-Brown," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49, no. 2 (2005): 92–96.

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Schools Can Teach about Reading: It's Fun."[5] The "love of reading" is often tied to the idea that reading has intrinsic value. Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel, for example, argues against giving external incentives for children to read because such incentives "habituate children to think of reading books as a way of [getting a reward], and so erode, or crowd out, or corrupt the love of reading for its own sake."[6]

In this essay, I will argue against the idea that children should be taught to "love" reading. Specifically, I will give reasons against the educational aim, implied in the statements above, that children should be taught to read *because* it is enjoyable, pleasurable, or fun. I also think we should not give the impression that reading has intrinsic value, apart from questions of what is read, how one reads, and how much one reads. I say this all while maintaining that reading widely and deeply is an essential activity of an educated person. In the end, I believe the motivations we provide to students *matter*, and that we must seek alternative ways of helping students see the need to read.

Reasons to Worry About the Love of Reading

My suspicion of the "love of reading" idea can be traced to several sources. First, I have always loved reading Plato's *Republic*. I was recently struck by Plato's critique of μουσική (*mousike*) in Books II, III, and X of the Republic, which give rise to his infamous censorship program. When he talks of censoring *mousike*, the targets he has in mind are the "makers of tales" (377c) or storytellers. This would include the novels in our own day, and also "the media" more broadly considered. His most relevant comments against the storytellers and novelists boil down to three arguments. The first is based on moral exemplars (392b): A good story, cleverly constructed and conveyed, can make bad actions seem good. The second argument is a metaphysical critique (596a-599a): stories are imitations of imitations, shadows of shadows, two steps removed from true reality. The third is a psychological critique (603b-606c): stories arouse emotions in us that throw off the delicate harmonious balance between body, mind, and soul necessary for the just human being. As I thought about Plato's critique, my mind went back to my experience several years ago of reading Ayn Rand's novel, *The Fountainhead*.[7] As a college sophomore, it is fair to say that I "loved" the book. Looking back, however, I see something of these Platonic dangers lurking behind my experience with *The Fountainhead*. Rand's story painted Howard Roark's self-centered

[5] Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith, "The Most Important Lesson Schools Can Teach Kids about Reading: It's Fun," *The Atlantic*, November 11, 2013, http://www.theatlantic .com/education/archive/2013/11/the-most-important-lesson-schools-can-teach-kids -about -reading-its-fun/281295/.

[6] Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 61.

[7] Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943).

individualism as heroic by making an explicit contrast with communitarian values (neglecting to acknowledge, of course, how the individual and community are intricately linked). Rand's portrayal of community as oppressive and dictatorial was one-sided, a selective distortion of human experience, an "imitation" of the social world some levels removed from what I now consider social "reality." Even the rape of Dominque by the powerful Roark, who takes what he wants without apology, seemed to be condoned and celebrated. Thus, I think Plato might have been on to something in his warnings.

Another worry about the love of reading comes from my reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson, another author that I always "love" to read. Emerson's essay "The American Scholar" was originally an address given to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard University in 1837. In that address, he cautions against an overemphasis on books. While Emerson is obviously immersed in books, and while he endorses books as one of the essential ways we expand our experiential reach, he warns that books create a "grave mischief."[8] He is not so much concerned with storytelling, like Plato was, but with the creation of ideas—not reading novels, so much as reading philosophy. Books are most valuable when they reveal human beings engaged in creative activity. All too often, though, Emerson warns, "The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, – the act of thought, – is transferred to the record." He continues:

> Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books. Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence, the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence, the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees.[9]

It is precisely the seductive power of books, the spell that they cast over us, that leads to Emerson's "grave mischief." To be a bookworm or bibliomaniac is to commit a type of suicide. Being swept up in books constitutes a denial of our own ability to think, to create, and to imagine, as we become lost in the worlds of words constructed by others. Emerson's arguments are important here because he shows how the "love of reading" can go awry, not just for those who read shallow escapist literature, but also for scholars and serious students of philosophy.

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[8] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 88.
[9] Ibid.

Emerson was also concerned that the bibliomaniac, immersed so completely in the printed page, was neglecting the living, breathing world around her, thus inhibiting the development of her human powers. Reading is good, Emerson believes, but we should recognize the opportunity costs. He would be very concerned with American writer Lynne Sharon Schwartz, when she writes, "I have done what people do, my life makes a reasonable showing. Can I go back to my books now?"[10] Emerson would be amazed at all the experiences in life that this longing—the longing to get "back to one's books"—seems to ignore and neglect. Swartz seems bored with the world beyond the printed page. For example, she seems to have little interest in directly experiencing the sights and sounds of nature: the wind blowing, the stars at night, people in their almost infinite variety, their visual and performing arts, and their endless parade of foibles, achievements, and tomfoolery. Emerson would worry about all the powers of action that lie dormant and unexercised by the bibliomaniacs. He would say that we have our own thoughts to develop and our own worlds to create. We have obligations to others: people who need our best efforts, encouragement, and kind words. They do not need us to sit motionless throughout our lives, Emerson would say, engrossed in texts that move our attention beyond the world that actually lies around us.

Emerson thought the bibliomania was particularly dangerous among scholars, who need to engage with multiple forms of experience to facilitate their scholarly tasks, but are too often content to emendate and interpret the writings of others. I think of one of my favorite poems, Yeats's 1917 poem, "The Scholars":

> Bald heads forgetful of their sins,
> Old, learned, respectable bald heads
> Edit and annotate the lines
> That young men, tossing on their bed,
> Rhymed out in love's despair
> To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.
>
> All shuffle there, all cough in ink;
> All wear carpet with their shoes;
> All think what other people think;
> All know the man their neighbor knows[11]

The contrast between the shuffling old scholars, "cough[ing] in ink," editing and categorizing lines of love poetry, to the passion of the lovers themselves, "tossing in their beds," creating the poems through their passion, is a contrast that is stark and jarring. The scholars wear "carpet with their shoes," the shoes and carpet offering multiple layers of separation from the ground, dirt, and

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[10] Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books* (Boston: Beacon), 15.
[11] William Butler Yeats, "The Scholars," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Arthur M. Eastman (New York: Norton, 1970), 442.

earth. The bookish scholars are separated from the experiential world they seek to understand.[12]

The final influence that has led me to question the "love of reading" is much more personal and it involves misgivings about my own practice as a parent of three children. I think it is fair to say that we are a family that "loves to read." We bring home bags of books from the local library, spending countless hours reading alone and to each other, our bedside lamps blazing late into the night, our beloved tomes becoming torn, dog-eared, and mangled. If you would have asked me a few years ago whether the "love of reading" was a goal I had for my children, I would have given a resounding, "Yes!" To be sure, I think my children read well and have a rich collection of wonderful stories to draw from and to think about. I begin to worry, though, when, on a bright and sunny day, on a day with so much to discover and explore, a day (as author Norman Maclean would say) with "dew still on it," a day full of "wonder and possibility," I find them sitting alone in their quiet and dark bedrooms, re-reading for the 5th time the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, or a Harry Potter book, or *Stars Wars: Clone Wars,* or whatever. From what I can tell these are, indeed, fun books, clever and insightful in their own ways. I read like this when I was growing up, reading and re-reading books I loved, Tolkien or Terry Brooks or Arthur C. Clark. And yet, something troubles me. We have learned to "love to read," but to what end? What might we be missing in life because reading had become such an important source of pleasure and fun? I should add that there is also sometimes a sense of incomprehension when I now timidly suggest that we do something else other than read. After all, we have stressed reading to them as a valuable thing to do, by both our words and examples. Reading is now, by definition, an unquestionably valuable—intrinsically valuable—way to spend one's time: "Don't interrupt Dad," they seem to say, "after all, I am *reading*!"

The Basic Argument

These sources of discontent have been festering in my mind for some time, twisting and poking, erupting now into a full-blown argument against the "love of reading" as an educational aim. What I will present here is not an argument against reading. What I am objecting to is framing our engagement with reading in terms of a particular form of "love," where love of reading is equated with reading for pleasure. This problematic formulation of "love"

[12] I wouldn't want to dichotomize too strongly "books" and "the real world." Books are part of the real word, part of engaging with both nature and humanity. But this doesn't mean that something is missing when we focus too much on the particular forms of engagement offered by books. For example, it would be hard to argue that there isn't something lost in physicality when we engage with books. Reading is sedentary. We don't want to dichotomize, but the lack of dichotomy does not mean that significant differences don't exist.

suggests reading practices that are susceptible to the worries expressed by Plato about *mousike* and by Emerson about bibliomaniacs.

Here is the basic argument. First, to talk of a "love of reading" is to describe and predict certain experiences that come when engaging with written texts. When I say that you will love the pistachio ice cream when you visit the Greek island of Aegina (and you will!), I am preparing you to have a certain sort of experience with that ice cream. In a similar fashion, to talk of a "love of reading," creates an experiential expectation that one will have while reading. The experiential expectation that we create when we talk about "a love of reading" is one of fun, pleasure, and enjoyment.[13] So, when we say that we want people to love to read, in general, we are saying that reading as a practice is something that leads to these fun, pleasant, and enjoyable experiences. This is sometimes explicitly stated, such as in the literature I opened with, where developing the "love of reading" is directly equated with reading for pleasure. I should also point out that, with this experiential expectation we are, in effect, giving students a reason for *why* they should read: It is fun! We are offering up to them a possible motivation to read and simultaneously validating and endorsing this motivation.

Describing the nature of the experiential expectation is the first major point I want to make. The second is this: setting up this experiential expectation, and thus constructing the enjoyment of reading as the motivation to read, is educationally problematic. It is problematic, first, because it comes to shape *what* we read, second, because it comes to shape *how* we read, and third, because it shapes *how much* we read. I will discuss each of these in turn.

First, the "love of reading" shapes what we read. Because we should "love to read," and thereby have enjoyable experiences with texts, we gravitate toward books that are easy to digest and to relate to, often (but not always) escapist literature and the like. The love of reading also pushes us toward fiction and nonfiction books with opinions we share and with authors who flatter us, who validate and inflame our uninformed emotions, and who confirm our experiences and perspectives. It is not fun and enjoyable to read what we often most need to read, from an educational perspective.

Along these lines, I think of a loveable little essay by writer Marc Edmundson. He describes his thoughts on student evaluation day at his university. He passes out the evaluations and then flees from his classroom with a sense of unease. It is not because his evaluations are bad. He is often commended for providing an "interesting" and "enjoyable" class. It is precisely *because* students describe his class as "fun" that leaves him vexed and troubled. He writes,

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[13] Now, the experiential expectation of "loving something" need not necessarily be a prediction of fun and enjoyment, I suppose, but this is usually the expectation that is communicated—after all, just ask McDonald's corporation why they adopted the slogan, "I'm lovin' it." It is not that people will find McDonald's hamburgers deeply rewarding and enlightening, but more immediately pleasurable and enjoyable.

> I have to admit that I do not much like the image of myself that emerges from these [evaluation] forms . . . I'm disturbed by the serene belief that my function—and, more important, Freud's, or Shakespeare's, or Blake's—is to divert, entertain, and interest . . . I don't teach to amuse, to divert, or even, for that matter, to be merely interesting. When someone says she "enjoyed" the course—and that word crops up again and again in my evaluations—somewhere at the edge of my immediate complacency I feel encroaching self-dislike. That is not at all what I had in mind . . . I want some of them to say that they've been changed by the course. I want them to measure themselves against what they've read . . . Why are my students describing the Oedipus complex and the death drive as being interesting and enjoyable to contemplate? And why am I coming across as an urbane, mildly ironic, endlessly affable guide to this intellectual territory, operating without intensity, generous, funny, and loose?[14]

When Edmundson worries that students have come to see his class in terms of enjoyment and entertainment, I can't help but worry that these sorts of proclivities are shaped in our first interactions with students, where we as educators or parents sell books to elementary students in terms of their entertainment value—"read this," we say to them, "you'll really love it." And, of course, all of this "lovin it" coheres nicely with our existence as consumers in post-industrial capitalism, where preference satisfaction is desired, both by those who want to sell us stuff and, more and more, as the existential project of our deepest selves. McDonald's corporation chose the slogan "I'm lovin' it" carefully. The "love of reading" fits nicely with this consumerist picture of ourselves. The love of reading points us to literary fast food.

The second educational problem with the love of reading is that it shapes *how* we read, and shapes it for the worse. Reading Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series in a certain way can indeed increase our understanding of gender and mass culture, just as reading *Mein Kampf* can increase one's understanding of history or of the totalitarian mind. That such valuable reading is possible is, of course, the major problem with Plato's censorship regime and with all censorship regimes. Censorship assumes that books by themselves can be objectionable or unobjectionable. But it is not only what one reads but also (and perhaps more importantly) *how* one reads that determines a text's educational value. Even bad books can be read productively. Sometimes reading productively and critically can be fun and enjoyable, but it often is not. The problem is that reading educationally often involves work, labor, and concentration of a very intense sort. The type of critical reading that validates

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[14] Mark Edmundson, "On the Use of Liberal Education: I. As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students," *Harper's Magazine* 295, no. 1768 (September 1997): 39–40.

spending time with an otherwise questionable text often demands that the reader approach the text as a type of anthropologist, examining the book as a cultural artifact. This is a somewhat unnatural and strange position to read from— we do not identify with the characters of the novel, we interrogate them, or analyze them from a perch of scholarly detachment. Critical reading is perhaps most difficult when it is turned on a text we treasure, something close to our political or religious sensibilities. It is easier and more natural to simply get swept up in a story or congenial idea than to adopt a critical or anthropological perspective. Indeed, psychologist Victor Nell has described what happens when we read for pleasure as "lucid reading."[15] This is a blissful engagement with the text where one pays effortless and joyous attention to the text. Nell largely celebrated this state of pleasurable engrossment, and I too have felt its attractions. But let's be clear: it is a way of reading that provides the least resistance. When we talk of a love of reading, we are suggesting an immersive form of reading that works against critical approaches.

So far, I have argued that the love of reading distorts what we read and how we read. Next is the third educational problem, namely, that the advancement of the "love of reading" as an educational end distorts *how much* we read vis-a-vis other important experiences. One way of stating this objection is that focusing on the love of reading blinds us to the opportunity costs that come with reading. The love of reading can lead to binge reading — even a type of unhealthy addiction—where other experiences can become neglected. Reading is an important, even vital way of experiencing and understanding the world. It is not, however, the only important way, and its value can sometimes become overly inflated, perhaps as it has with Swartz. Books are their most powerful, I would argue, when there is an interplay between what one reads and one's lived experiences, each casting interpretive light on the other.

An example of this interplay between reading and lived experience comes from my own life. In my teaching, the subject of death sometimes comes up. We talk about Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul, or Heidegger's notion of being-toward-death, or Tolstoy's lovely novella, the *Death of Ivan Ilych*. It wasn't until a few years ago, though, that I had actually had a direct and sustained encounter with death (something that is sometimes quite rare in the modern world). Through my church, I became friends with an older couple that had recently moved into our area. The husband, Joe, had been fighting a 15-year battle against Parkinson's disease. When I met him, he was paralyzed and unable to speak. Mary, his wife, had been his gentle and dutiful care provider for many years. I watched Joe sharply decline over the course of a few months, his skin growing paler, his breathing becoming more labored and raspy, his body curled on the side of the bed. He had been sent home from the hospital to die, and I watched the worried expressions on Mary's face, her mix

[15] Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

of denial, exhaustion, and panic. I would often come to visit them. I would watch as she would gently hold him, stroking his hair as he struggled to breath, wiping his forehead with a washcloth. Caring for him had been her reason for being for over a decade. When he died, I came over to be with Mary. Joe had been dead for about an hour and on his face was an expression that told a story of discomfort during his final moments. I was asked to lift and to help transport Joe's corpse to the waiting car of the funeral home. I touched Joe's body. It was cold, surprisingly light, emaciated after his long decline. Mary's emotions, though, surprised me—she was devastated, in one sense, but there was also a sense of relief that the intense task as caregiver was now complete. It was really the first time I had confronted a particular death in such a vivid, complex, and potent way, both challenging and enriching what I read about death. Death in that particular moment was both more and less than what my readings had suggested. If too much focus on reading had foreclosed these sorts of experiences (and my close friendship certainly did take time away from my reading and scholarship), I would have been much poorer for it, intellectually and morally.

So, the experiential expectation implied by a love of reading changes what we read, how we read, and how much we read—often for the worse. As we read for escape, enjoyment, and fun, I believe we become more susceptible to the worries expressed by Plato and Emerson. As we read simply for entertainment and pleasure, as our reading becomes immersive and "lucid," our emotions are more easily manipulated by the storyteller (or philosopher), and our critical faculties are less likely to be engaged. The texts we read become less substantive and our engagement less critical and more superficial. Reading for pleasure and escape can become a form of addiction and other areas of human experience begin to dim in importance. We begin to ask with Swartz, "Can I just get back to my books now?"

A final point. When we talk of reading having intrinsic value, or when as educators we highlight that "reading," by itself, is something that students should "love to do," we valorize an activity as "educational" that does not always deserve this valorization. We mislead people into thinking that, because they are reading, they are doing something of real intellectual and moral value. Under these circumstances, reading by itself can give the illusion that one is expanding one's knowledge and understanding without actually doing so. We confuse bookishness for thinking. We are taught that reading should be fun or pleasant by well-meaning educators, so we end up believing that all of our fun reading is therefore educational. To teach the "love of reading" as an educational aim is to teach people to be delusional. We should just admit that sometimes watching TV can be much more educational than reading a book. Let's simply admit that the value of reading depends on how it enriches human life—it is instrumental through and through.

Some Objections

Some might argue that convincing students that reading is fun and enjoyable is an important step in learning to read fluently and effortlessly. It is only when students love to read that they *will* read, and continued practice at reading is essential to becoming a fluent reader. Once students become fluent readers, they will engage more substantive texts and read in more critical and creative ways. In response to this objection, I would challenge some of the assumptions that are being made. While it seems true that students must read consistently to become fluent readers, it does not seem to be true that fostering a "love of reading," or focusing only on the pleasure they will get, is the *only* way to get them to read. We can certainly allow reading to be fun, and we can use this fun to help students read by giving to them fun books, but we should not emphasize entertainment as the *point* of reading. The move away from entertainment to substance can and should be made explicit as the book is discussed. Finally, I doubt we can be sure that readers, once they become fluent through reading for entertainment, will necessarily gravitate to more educationally meaningful reading practices—some do, of course, but many do not.

Another objection to my argument is that I have unnecessarily truncated the notion of "love" to that of a shallow pleasure, enjoyment, and entertainment. It is possible that a love of reading does not mean having pleasure, enjoyment, and entertainment as one reads, but something deeper. There might be richer intellectual and social pleasures that are linked to reading. For example, we might fall in love with the "inner work" that is often linked to reading or with using reading "to become the kind of people [we] want to become."[16] We might think back to Plato's notion of *eros*, and conceptualize the "love of reading" as a type of spiritual or intellectual longing for completion. An erotic interpretation of the "love of reading" would perhaps quell some of these worries that I have brought up. This sort of love would possibly point the reader toward different books since the longing is not for entertainment but for a sense of personal completion.

I think that this objection to my position conflates the love of reading with the love of learning. One can read without learning, obviously, and one can learn without reading. On this point, I believe it is incorrect to say that those who rightly value the "inner work" involved with reading, or those who see reading as a source of erotic self-completion, should be seen as lovers of reading. They are, instead, lovers of the inner work, not lovers of reading. Reading has instrumental value because it can contribute to this sort of work. I endorse reading as a project of self-development, then, but we should not equate this with a love of reading. Love of reading, when it is described in any sort of defensible way, seems to collapse into the love of learning. So, this cannot be a defense of the love of reading.

[16] Wilhelm and Smith, "Most Important Lesson."

Alternative Motivations to Read

I have argued against the love of reading. And yet, the idea that people should read, and read widely and deeply, remains an important part of what it means to be an educated person. Reading has been, and still very much is, a vital pathway to learning about oneself and the larger world. So how, then, should we answer the question, "Why should I read?"

I have two ideas. The first has already come up. As an alternative to talking about the love of reading, we should emphasize the love of learning. If educators are successful, students will read because they love to learn, not because they love to read (or not just because they love read). A student who loves to learn would probably read more substantive books in more critical and creative ways.

Something more is needed, though, because the "love of learning" itself falls prey to some of the objections I have raised about the "love of reading." The experiential expectation of "love" translates into an expectation of enjoyment, pleasure, and fun. Even emphasizing the "love of learning" may be a problem, then, because some of the most important learning experiences are not fun or pleasant; rather, they are difficult and painful. The idea that we should "love to learn," while an improvement over the "love of reading," still may funnel students away from these difficult learning experiences.

This brings my second idea, which is that both reading and learning be tied to a sense of social contribution. We should find a way to communicate to students that reading and learning are moral tasks. I may be overly hopeful and optimistic here, but I believe that young people are often motivated to do something because they simply think it is the right thing to do. I have found that they volunteer, engage in service learning, and so forth, partly because they feel a sense of responsibility to others and to their communities. Reading can and should be framed as part of this social responsibility. The argument for a moral responsibility to read could be sketched like this: The written word connects us to the world and to other people. We have a moral duty to engage with the world in intelligent and informed ways. This sort of intelligent action can only come to us through deep reflection on the world, which is now still largely found in books and other written media. The educated person needs to see herself as a "reader," then, even though she may not enjoy the process of reading very much. In fact, the reader may suffer, in some sense, recognizing that she needs to change her thoughts and behavior.

The moral motivation to read, when brought together with a love of learning, seems to capture what makes reading so valuable in human life. The educated person reads, not just for entertainment, but for enlightenment; not just for pleasure, but for purpose; not just to escape the world, but to change the world. The person takes satisfaction in personal development, but it is a development channeled by moral purposes. Reading practices guided by a sense of our duties to others, combined with a love of learning, will point readers toward better books and more critical reading practices. This vision of

channeled motivation is convincing, at least to me, because it captures how I feel after finishing a challenging book—there is the discomfort in undertaking a difficult process, but an underlying satisfaction in having taken on the journey.

A Melancholy Postscript

In conclusion, though, I feel I should make clear a tension that I have only hinted at. I offer a rather melancholy postscript, fitting for moments like these, when one's critique can be applied squarely against oneself. Below the surface of the essay silently sits a mass grave. The love of reading has conceived and given birth to arguments against itself. My love of Plato and Emerson, Yeats, and Tolstoy, has spawned an instinct that is both treacherous and murderous. The instinct is suicidal, killing in an act of self-negation and self-defiance, killing the lover of reading inside of me. It is also matricidal, killing what has birthed and nursed me. The love of reading has made this essay possible. And yet, I kill the lover of reading inside me, even though it has put me here before you. I am now Orestes and Electra, killing my mother because of moral ideals. I am now Norman Bates, and it is my voice sounding out from my murdered mother's skeleton.