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*Outside of a dog, a book
is a man's best friend.
Inside of a dog, it's too
dark to read.*

—Groucho Marx



THE TIME OF READING

A meditation on the fate of books in an impatient age

Sven Birkerts

I had originally planned to talk on a subject that I formulated to myself as “The Time of Reading,” my sketchy notion being to explore the differences between the world we inhabit and the world we generate from language. But before that “originally” sends you scuttling out the back exit in disappointment, let me assure you that I will in some way be addressing the time of reading, only I will come at it somewhat more obliquely than I had at first intended. For since I long ago made my plans to speak, there has appeared in *Harper’s* magazine an essay entitled “Closing the Books: A Once Devoted Reader Arrives at the End of the Story,” by a writer named Arthur Krystal, and it has so affected me that I feel I would be wasting this wonderful forum if I did not somehow respond.

When I first came upon Mr. Krystal’s essay I felt as confirmed and unnerved as might the meteorologist who weighs a set of clima-

tological factors and predicts—correctly—a hurricane, and then looks more closely and sees that it is bearing down on his own home city.

I mean, I have been assessing our cultural situation for some time now and asserting, in essence, that an array of changing conditions has seriously undermined the centrality of the book and the privileged place of reading; arguing, too, that the sense-making operations of literature no longer serve us as they once did. But I, who should therefore have been *least* surprised by Mr. Krystal's lament, nonetheless felt myself, to modify Wordsworth, surprised by sadness.

Some of you may have read the essay, but let me recap it for those of you who have not. Mr. Krystal does not really mount an argument. What he does is lay bare his heart, exploring from one side and another his inexplicable loss of interest in literature and reading, a loss he characterizes as “no less a palpable sensation than falling out of love,” adding that in both cases we not only “experience the loss of connection to another but something is also missing in one's relation to oneself.” Krystal is baffled. He can recall how it used to be, for himself, but also for the culture. He cites Anatole Broyard's fond recollection of his Greenwich Village days: “Books were our weather, our environment, our clothing. We didn't simply read books; we became them.” And the implication is clear: He is not the only one to have lost his faith. The youthful adoration of reading *is* like young love; growing up means growing away from immoderate intensities.

Krystal identifies himself as a man in his middle 40's—from childhood on, until recently, a voracious reader; a reader, moreover, who felt he knew how books and experience connected. He, if anyone, would have been ripe for re-reading Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. But he explains how he looked at Lambert Strether's world and turned away after a mere three pages: “It was as if I'd forgotten how to swim, or, if not quite that, as if reading it wasn't worth the effort.” Krystal is obviously vexed. He wonders if the problem might not have to do, in part, with contemporary writing becoming ordinary “because our expectations of literature are so ordinary. Or maybe we grow out of adolescence and young adulthood to find that most writers are less interesting than we think ourselves to be.” But no, Krystal inadvertently undoes that surmise soon after, affirming that “The sad truth is, I am unable to think seriously about any writer. Instead I think about what every middle-aged, nonliterary person thinks about: family, health, health insurance, money, property, time running out, etc.”

You should have the flavor of the essay by now. Let me cite three more passages and then get on with my business. One: “. . . it seems to me,” writes Krystal, “that a necessary component of the literary life is a certain romantic attachment to life itself. But life is not very romantic these days. I’m not sure if it ever was, but at least in the days before media transformed the nature of existence by devaluing the idea of privacy, a writer’s imaginative powers and a reader’s imaginative responses were shaped by a real sense of possibility.”

Two: “The reason novels are no longer news is not simply that the news can now be electronically transmitted but that the integrity of once private and powerful emotions has been cheapened by the nature and volume of our public discourse.” And finally: “I don’t mean simply that literature is being shouted down by the media but that novelists and poets somehow know deep in their bones that their work no longer possesses the cultural resonance that writers could once take for granted.”

I linger for so long on Mr. Krystal’s observations not because they are one writer’s particularly downbeat musings on the state of things, but because they were given pride of place in one of our country’s leading journals of ideas and opinion; because at some level these ideas were being credited as being something more than confessions of an individual failure, were seen as possibly representative. Or if not representative, then provocative—with the understanding that provocation is only really effective where there exists some degree of ambivalence. Not long after I had first copied out these various surmises by Krystal, I happened to read a newly published interview with novelist John Updike. At one point, replying to the interviewer’s question about the loss of silence in our lives, Updike asserts: “There is an eroding of the private self. I think we’re scared, of course, of silence. And now we have the technology to surround ourselves with noise all the time. I think it means a lessening not only of our religious lives, such as they are, but even of our emotional lives. Forget religion, I just don’t think that, say, making love can be as powerful, as amazing, and as magical as it was for my repressed generation, in which there was still some silence, and there was still a lot of ignorance, a lot of innocence.” Let me keep these words as a backdrop to the observations that will follow.

If I fastened on anything in Krystal’s essay, apart from its pervasive deflationary candor, it was perhaps that lovely and archaic word, “romantic.” Recall the whole setting: “. . . it seems to me that a necessary component of the literary life is a certain romantic attachment to life itself.”

“Romantic,” as we all know, is one of the soft words in our cultural lexicon. Other soft words include “soul,” “spirit,” “sensibility,” “inwardness,” “poetic,” and perhaps even “meaning.” All are words formerly of high estate that have been depreciated, rendered old-fashioned, and removed to the sidelines by the rapidly mutating conditions of contemporary life. They are words that cannot stand unshielded in the magnesium glare of empirical reason. They are words that a user tends to inflect ironically or mark off with tone quotes so that others will know that they are not being offered up as legitimate currency. A half a beat’s hesitation before the enunciation of a word can tell as much about the cultural state of things as a clutch of learned articles.

A quick check of the dictionary confirms that “romantic”—in the sense we mean, which is to say *not* in its amatory application—is indeed the very opposite of “empirical.” It can mean, “Of a fabulous or fictitious character,” “imaginary, purely ideal,” “Fantastic, extravagant, quixotic; going beyond what is rational or practical,” and “readily influenced by the imagination.” All of these definitions could be said to carry, nowadays, a slightly pejorative valence. They refer to a view of things which may or may not have once been charged with vigor, but which has certainly been discredited; has been draped, like some old party dress over the less gaudy artifacts found at the rummage sale of history.

So what does Krystal mean when he writes: “. . . it seems to me that a necessary component of the literary life is a certain romantic attachment to life itself”? What *is* a romantic attachment to life? Is it, as the definitions might suggest, an “extravagant” or “imaginary” or “irrational” attachment? No, none of these seem to hit it squarely. My sense is that Krystal wants “romantic” to signify a charged subjectivity, a purposeful self-intensity that most of us know as the very essence of adolescence, a state or feeling that necessarily wanes after repeated head-buttings against the so-called “reality principle.” To be “romantic” is to have the capacity to dream, to manifest a freshness in the face of experience. Fitzgerald described his Gatsby as having a “romantic readiness” for life.

In any case, I do agree with Krystal that a love of literature and of reading of the sort that could be called “immersive”—as opposed to “escapist”—is bound up with this attitude toward life which we can call, using the word as shorthand, “romantic.” And I believe, further, that the romantic is very closely tied to the private, and that it is this, the private, that is threatened with eradication, not just by the myriad electronic circuits we have woven into the fabric of our lives, but also by the collective mind-state that upholds circuitized interconnectedness as ultimately desirable. And what is privacy? It

is, for me, the sheath of solitude we all receive in order that the self might relax into its natural proportions. It is the silence and removal we all must have at times if we are to hear and heed our inner promptings. The fading of the importance of reading, as Krystal represents it, is only one consequence of the erosion of our privacy. If we heed Updike, then the lessening of our religious lives and the loss of mystery in our love lives would be others. But important as it is, the study of the destruction of privacy is too enormous to be dealt with adequately here. My concern is with books and reading.

What I say about our habits of the book is, and must remain, a tissue of suppositions. There are no statistics on why or how or if people read—we can only give adequate measure of units shipped and sold. I have only my intuitions, readings taken on the fallible barometer of the self, and whatever I can glean from talking to others. Krystal's situation—his loss of faith—seems to me as common as it is distressing. I hear similar things from educated—indeed, highly literate—people all the time, though usually the blame is laid more entirely to personal shortcomings or just the circumstantial stresses of modern life: work schedules, parenting demands, the tail-chasing operation of trying to make ends meet. . . . Not many of the defectors come out and blame literature itself.

Whatever we determine is the cause, the fact remains that for a great many people, people who in former times would have proudly accounted themselves as readers, reading no longer plays a centrally defining role in their lives. More books are printed—I know. And more dollars are spent on books—I know that, too. But I also know that when I stand in the aisles of one of the new mega-stores I do not feel transfixed by a sense of cultural vitality. I brood about this a great deal. How do I square the statistics with the gut feeling—a feeling which, incidentally, is not just mine but is shared by a great many people I talk to? Both private reading and contemplation and the larger public circulation of ideas and responses—these appear to have ebbed significantly. In the case of former readers this suggests a changed relation between self and world. In the larger picture, which necessarily includes the mass of non-readers as well, we see an even greater collective distancing from the culture of books and ideas.

This bears contemplating. I am persuaded by an observation made by my friend George Scialabba: that the condition of our intellectual—our readerly—life has as much to do with the attitudes of non-readers as anything else; that in former times non-readers at least paid homage to the world of books, certified its importance, whereas now, much more often, they live out their lives in utter indifference, if not a kind of defensive contempt. If this is the

case—and it may indeed be—then the minority of surviving readers might understandably feel like a troupe of actors playing before an all but empty house.



What gets lost when books and reading suffer a prestige drop of the sort they are now suffering? It is not merely that there is less exposure to and discussion of ideas—ideas of the sort that only books can effectively convey—it is also, less tangibly, that the cultural resonances of the book begin to fade. For reading, like any complex societal practice, is not just a thing one does, it also embodies and represents a whole array of values. For us in the West the reading of books signifies an aspiration to enlightened humanism. The iconic book—tome—whether pictured in paintings or used as a backdrop detail in home decorating catalogues, represents, among other things, knowledge, wisdom, tradition, cultivation and inwardness, and the image of the reader figures for us an immersion in these values. We continue to honor both icon and image, even as we are seeing the practice slip away to the peripheries. Much, one might say, as we still respect church and cross without feeling the more strenuous compulsions of true faith. So what do we imagine is happening? Are we in some collective way turning away from these most primary and defining of values? The

case would not be easy to argue. No one I know would openly repudiate the ideal of wisdom, say, or of tradition, or cultivation. Not repudiate, no. But more than a few would, I suspect, arch their brows as if to say, “Come on . . .” And it’s true, isn’t it, these are more soft words, words that only politicians and preachers can speak without ironic inflection or tell-tale pause?

We need to be clear about causal sequences. It’s not, as some might think, that people are turning against reading—reading specifically—and thereby changing their orientation to the culture. Rather, a whole array of forces working through our society is changing the deep patterns of how people behave in public and private; is modifying, further, their sense of self, and dissipating subjectivity. One consequence of this—and there are many others—is a loss of interest in and will for reading. Here I would list a number of background changes, all of which contribute to this more specific loss.

1. People feel a growing sense of distractedness and diffusion, this resulting from a huge increase in stimuli, much of it sensory and informational overload in some ways connected to the power and seductiveness of electronic technologies. But even as they are aware of the situation and, to a degree, its cause, they feel powerless to effect any fundamental change. The glut seems systemic, all-pervasive.

2. There is a loss of actual solitude—what might be called duration time—this both for concrete reasons (including the sheer economics of life, which are forcing everyone to scramble more aggressively and for longer hours simply to avoid losing ground) and because there is almost no societal sanction for meditative isolation, no way in which ideals of reflectiveness are modeled for us. It is a sublime irony that Thoreau’s *Walden* should be our national “classic”—I can imagine nothing further from our practice and aspiration than Thoreau’s voluntary retreat from the daily round of Concord society. But even in his day one could inveigh against our enslavement by drudgery and our almost constitutional depreciation of inwardness. Bad then, it’s worse now. Nothing—not much even in our schools—suggests how reading philosophy or history or literature might help a person to live more reflectively or better. With the loss of solitary time—which all of these disciplines require—they take on footnote status at best.

3. We see no real attempt to align ourselves with traditions—our sense of the past has shrunk down to the commodification of antiques, preserved homes, and theme parks. There is no feeling of connectedness; rather, it is as if a gulf had opened up at some point in the last two decades, with *then* on one side in grainy black-and-

white and retro fashions, and *now* on the other with bright colors and pulsing music. So far as many of the young are concerned, books and print are mainly then. This historical dissociation—abetted so energetically by the montage ethos of pop culture—leaches away the larger field of mattering to which book culture has always implicitly pledged itself. Again, the person for whom the continuities are important, are the basis of his sense of the truth, feels that his sound is greeted by no echo, that his figure throws no shadow in the afternoon sun.

4. This is most intangible, but I will hazard it: that people less and less live with an awareness of a higher goal. For the individual this would mean a sense of *telos* beyond the attainment of irrefutable financial security; would involve, in fact, leaving a mark—on the culture, on history, at very least on the community he or she belongs to. Collectively this means believing that society is progressing in some direction, toward some goal, that its members are charged with some sense of mission. Do we have any such impetus? Not that I can detect.

And on it goes. One could keep listing symptoms. But my point is not to indict society so much as to establish that the decline of reading—of the prestige and place of reading—is not an isolated phenomenon, but is, rather, the result of a befuddling set of changes which are affecting reader and non-reader alike. That these changes are brought about not just by technological innovations (though they represent a major force), but also by the global economy, by our Western loss of faith in any and all of the so-called “master narratives”—the sense-making theories that implicitly gave some purchase on futurity. I would say that looking past these causal forces, looking through them as through a mist, we can begin to discern a new creature in the making: the atomized, or, in psychologist Robert Jay Lifton’s coinage, the “protean” self. That is, the self no longer tightly gathered about a core identity, no longer pledged to simple membership in an organic human community, but rather fluid, capable of metamorphosis—of donning masks, assuming roles, carrying out various tasks at once. The self of the future may indeed be a decentered entity, liberated from the isolation that once pressed in the warps and wrinkles of eccentric subjectivity, enabled through omnipresent circuitries to distribute itself through systems and networks. If this sounds far-fetched, look to the latest work of thinkers like Kenneth Gergen or Lifton or Sherry Turkle or any one of the techno-theorists hypothesizing about life in the next millennium. Most of them are quite sanguine about the prospects of a dissolving subjective center, as if that will hasten us to making some grand collective evolutionary stride. I have my doubts on this score.

What I don't doubt is that we are in the midst of a vast range of transformations, societal and psychological. Many of these are related to the implementation of the microchip, but there's no point in trying to finger a single cause. The picture is one of total change, and if we cannot always see this it's because we are like the passengers in an airplane hurtling along at 500-plus miles an hour staring at the static scene outside the porthole window. Caught up in the motion, one has a harder time registering it.

We surmise the big change, often, by taking note of isolated smaller shifts. We spend less time in tranquil absorption, or in nature, or talking face to face with our friends, or . . . or reading the way we used to. Let reading stand for some of these other things as well. I contend that reading has slipped away because conditions in the culture and in the self have changed. To read—and I'm talking about the more serious kinds of reading—one needs focus, silence, and deep time; one needs, also, a sense that the act connects with or matters to the larger culture, that it is not merely the irradiation of our privacy, but a tether of some sort to the world we inhabit. We need to believe that by immersing ourselves in a book we are moving toward something we want to reach.

For these reasons, no amount of campaigning by librarians and school administrators, no posters showing movie stars and hockey players holding books (the images generally discrediting both parties)—none of this is likely to make a difference. Reading of the sort we nostalgically harken to—deep, engrossed, ardent, knowledge- and wisdom-oriented—belongs to history. It is nearly as mythic as fishing in the millstream with a cane pole or chasing cows barefoot on a summer afternoon. If any of us attain it, it's probably only for a mockingly brief moment. No, that reading now belongs to the historical epochs marked by the “slowness” that Milan Kundera recently—in a book of that title: *Slowness*—singled out as their sublimely defining attribute. Slowness is gone and it will never return. Slowness could only flourish where the omnivorous gaze of the camera had not penetrated, where the electrical impulse had not yet flickered; where the world was not saturated with its own images, its own mad simultaneity. That world is gone, and with it the Golden Age of the book and of reading.

But all is not therefore lost. After the Golden Age comes the Silver, and the Iron. The old role of reading *is* gone, but I have begun to wonder whether reading may not have a new, somewhat different role to play in the future. And here, in pondering this, I finally butt up against the title of my lecture, “The Time Of Reading.” For what that phrase now evokes for me is something oppositional, a counter to everything we mean when we speak of “today's world.”

In other words, I cannot, like Mr. Krystal, simply lament the fact that reading will no longer fit in with the rhythms and purposes of the cultural present. I will say, rather, that the main point of reading now—at least from one angle—is that it does not. *That is—or must become—the triumph of reading.* And as we move remorselessly forward, adapting ourselves to speed, simultaneity, surfaces, and stresses, the reading act will become not only more difficult, but more important as well. The time of reading, the “deep time” that I have written about elsewhere—that is, in essence, absorbed experiential time wherein we are utterly unaware of the clockface or the clicking of digits—will become one of the surest paths back. Not so much to a specific past, but to the more reflective and contained selves we will realize we cannot bear to lose touch with. Reading will thus become an act of restoration, and the time experience of reading—the creation of that absorption—will become our fondest aspiration. Perhaps this is the paradox to end all paradoxes: that we may finally take up our books less for their content—for information or narrative—than for the interior process that the page-turning engagement enables.

Reading, in this way, will be liberated; it will disclose its essential nature. It will be, to take an analogy, like walking after the advent of the automobile: no longer so necessary—because we have a faster way to get from here to there—but more desired, at least by some. Desired because something about the movement, about the engagement of now dissociated parts of the physical and mental self, feels like the closing of a circuit. And this sensation—of being again rooted, again charged—is what will finally matter. It is the very sensation we will seek out or try to regain in our living. 📖

A lecture given at the New York Public Library.



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