DEEP READING: THE SERIOUS TASK OF BEGUILEMENT

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Do you remember what it was like when you were young, and you used to get completely lost in what you were reading? Perhaps you still do? As Elizabeth Stroud, Pulitzer Prize winner, mentioned recently, “Sometimes I miss the kind of reading I did as a teenager, when you read and read and read. . . it was so wonderful”. 1

When this happens we are “deep reading.” We are plunging headlong into reading (be it fiction or non-fiction) to the extent that we are able to block out and forget our physical surroundings. In the words of Saint Isaac of Syria “. . . . Then, as in a dream, I enter a state when my senses and thoughts are concentrated”. 2 Wolf and Banzillia’s more technical description is “the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight.” 3

As readers we take the words of the author and together with our imaginations, our knowledge, our emotions, and our experiences we build mental pictures in our brains. We empathise with the characters in the book; we follow the arguments of the author. We may laugh out loud; we may cry; our blood pressure may rise; our hearts beat faster. When we are “deep reading” we travel wherever the author takes us. Lately I have been up in a plane 4, trapped in a house 5 and dancing on the moon. 6 Once we have “come back down to earth”, and maybe even days later, if it is a good book, we may still find ourselves thinking about the book and making new connections with the ideas we have read. In the words of Peter Hitchens these are the books that “will beguile you and leave you better than you were before”. 7

In order to achieve this state of “deep reading” readers need practice and reading maturity. Reading is an acquired skill. We are not born readers 8 and we have only been reading for 5,500 years. 9 When we learn to read we start by reading out loud before we become silent internalised readers. We cannot begin to “deep read” until we are beyond thinking about the mechanics of reading and have become fluent readers. We need a sustained period of time to devote to the reading experience. We need tranquillity and peace, or in the words of Carl Honoré we need to find our “Inner tortoise”. 10 We need to be actively engaged by choosing what we want to read; it is not the same if someone else chooses our reading for us, or we have to read something. We need to cultivate stamina and concentration, and we need curiosity. As this happens we are shaping neural pathways in our brain. “What we read and how deeply we read shape both the brain and the thinker”. 11 “Human beings are changed by the evolving richness of the neural networks that we add through our reading over time”. 12

Deep reading brings us many benefits. A study investigating the role of fiction and empathy found that empathy was influenced but only when people were emotionally transported. 13 Deep reading gives us knowledge; connection; relaxation; and therapy. Being immersed in a book is an enjoyable experience. If you ask a reader “What was better, the film or the book?” The answer will invariably be, the book. Why is this? The answer has to be the time spent “deep reading” with imagination; the film always misses things out. James Cameron the film director and producer (Titanic and Avatar) said, “Imagination is a force that can actually manifest a reality”. 14

Perhaps of even greater importance “deep reading” gives us universal truths and ultimately – wisdom. Birkerts believes that “the search for truth requires deep reading and deep thinking.” 15 and the authors of an article in 1997 wrote, “The search for truth should be the central focus of learning and schools. Deep reading and deep thinking are dual processors which inform each search and lead us toward insight and illumination”. 16

There are many distractions that prevent “deep reading” and it is all too easy to blame it on the author and the book, and say that the book was “Not interesting”, “Too hard”, or “Boring”. But factors that work against “deep reading” also emanate from the reader including not having or making enough time, not having peace and quiet, not having enough concentration, not using as much attention and having too much to read.

It is interesting to compare historical fears about writing and wisdom with current fears about Google, Twitter and “information foraging”. 17 Carr writes, “In Phaedrus, Socrates bemoaned the development of writing. He feared that, as people came to rely on the written word as a substitute for the knowledge they used to carry inside their heads, they would, in the words of one of the dialogue’s characters, “cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful”. And because they would be able to “receive a quantity of information without proper instruction” they would “be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant”. They would be “filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom”. 18

Today we have a multiplicity of digital mediums beyond the book with huge amounts of information. It will be interesting to discover whether the advent of eBooks has an effect on deep reading and our capacity to contemplate and think about our reading. As Maryanne Wolf writes “Will we lose the “deep reading” brain in a digital culture? No one knows – yet”. 19

And it is not only eBooks, is Google really making us stupid? Five years ago Nicholas Carr wrote, “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski”. 20
With so much information available to us it is very easy to become distracted; to lose direction; and to skim and scan through the web. With this type of reading is it still the case that the more you read, the more you know? Birkets describes this as "the electronic impulse [that] works against the durational reverie of reading" but the answer to this barrage of information according to Maryanne Wolf is "to find the ability to pause and pull back".20

Does "deep reading" matter? Yes, it does, because reading goes hand in hand with writing, and how we read now will have an impact upon the future of culture. Can we balance deep reading with online reading? As an optimist I am hopeful and agree with Bill Thompson when he says, "I don't think that having access to Twitter diminishes my capacity for deep reading, nor make it unachievable in the young, although it does mean it has to be something taught and worked at, like other skills. It also has to be maintained. But then, it always has been — making people fully literate has never been a trivial task". 21

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Bibliography

12. Ibid

Background reading