

THE LOST ART OF READING By David L. Ulin

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Sometime late last year -- I don't remember when, exactly -- I noticed I was having trouble sitting down to read. That's a problem if you do what I do, but it's an even bigger problem if you're the kind of person I am. Since I discovered reading, I've always been surrounded by stacks of books. I read my way through camp, school, nights, weekends; when my girlfriend and I backpacked through Europe after college graduation, I had to buy a suitcase to accommodate the books I picked up along the way. For her, the highlight of the trip was the man in Florence who offered a tour of the Uffizi. For me, it was the serendipity of stumbling across a London bookstall that had once been owned by the Scottish writer Alexander Trocchi, whose work, then as now, I adored. After we got married four years later, we spent part of our honeymoon in Dollarton, outside Vancouver, British Columbia, visiting the beach where "Under the Volcano" author Malcolm Lowry had lived for more than a decade with his wife Marjorie in a squatter's shack.

In his 1967 memoir, "Stop-Time," Frank Conroy describes his initiation into literature as an adolescent on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "I'd lie in bed . . .," he writes, "and read one paperback after another until two or three in the morning. . . . The real world dissolved and I was free to drift in fantasy, living a thousand lives, each one more powerful, more accessible, and more real than my own." I know that boy: Growing up in the same neighborhood, I was that boy. And I have always read like that, although these days, I find myself driven by the idea that in their intimacy, the one-to-one attention they require, books are not tools to retreat from but rather to understand and interact with the world.

So what happened? It isn't a failure of desire so much as one of will. Or not will, exactly, but focus: the ability to still my mind long enough to inhabit someone else's world, and to let that someone else inhabit mine. Reading is an act of contemplation, perhaps the only act in which we allow ourselves to merge with the consciousness of another human being. We possess the books we read, animating the waiting stillness of their language, but they possess us also, filling us with thoughts and observations, asking us to make them part of ourselves. This is what Conroy was hinting at in his account of adolescence, the way books enlarge us by giving direct access to experiences not our own. In order for this to work, however, we need a certain type of silence, an ability to filter out the noise.

Such a state is increasingly elusive in our over-networked culture, in which every rumor and mundanity is blogged and tweeted. Today, it seems it is not contemplation we seek but an odd sort of distraction masquerading as being in the know. Why? Because of the illusion that illumination is based on speed, that it is more important to react than to think, that we live in a culture in which something is attached to every bit of time.

Here we have my reading problem in a nutshell, for books insist we take the opposite position, that we immerse, slow down. "After September 11," Mona Simpson wrote as part of a 2001 LA Weekly round-table on reading during wartime, "I didn't read books for the news. Books, by their nature, are never new enough." By this, Simpson doesn't mean she stopped reading; instead, at a moment when it felt as if time was on fast forward, she relied on books to pull back from the onslaught, to distance herself from the present as a way of reconnecting with a more elemental sense of who we are.

Of course, the source of my distraction is somewhat different: not an event of great significance but the usual ongoing trivialities. I am too susceptible, it turns out, to the tumult of the culture, the sound and fury signifying nothing. For many years, I have read, like E.I. Lonoff in Philip Roth's "The Ghost Writer," primarily at night -- a few hours every evening once my wife and kids have gone to bed. These days, however, after spending hours reading e-mails and fielding

phone calls in the office, tracking stories across countless websites, I find it difficult to quiet down. I pick up a book and read a paragraph; then my mind wanders and I check my e-mail, drift onto the Internet, pace the house before returning to the page. Or I want to do these things but don't. I force myself to remain still, to follow whatever I'm reading until the inevitable moment I give myself over to the flow. Eventually I get there, but some nights it takes 20 pages to settle down. What I'm struggling with is the encroachment of the buzz, the sense that there is something *out there* that merits my attention, when in fact it's mostly just a series of disconnected riffs and fragments that add up to the anxiety of the age.

Yet there is time, if we want it. Contemplation is not only possible but necessary, especially in light of all the overload. In her recent essay collection "The Winter Sun" (Graywolf: 196 pp., \$15 paper), Fanny Howe quotes Simone Weil: "One must believe in the reality of time. Otherwise one is just dreaming." That's the point precisely, for without time we lose a sense of narrative, that most essential connection to who we are. We live in time; we understand ourselves in relation to it, but in our culture, time collapses into an ever-present now. How do we pause when we must know everything instantly? How do we ruminate when we are constantly expected to respond? How do we immerse in something (an idea, an emotion, a decision) when we are no longer willing to give ourselves the space to reflect?

This is where real reading comes in -- because it demands that space, because by drawing us back from the present, it restores time to us in a fundamental way. There is the present-tense experience of reading, but also the chronology of the narrative, as well as of the characters and author, all of whom bear their own relationships to time. There is the fixity of the text, which doesn't change whether written yesterday or a thousand years ago. St. Augustine composed his "Confessions" in AD 397, but when he details his spiritual upheaval, his attempts to find meaning in the face of transient existence, the immediacy of his longing obliterates the temporal divide. "I cannot seem to feel alive unless I am alert," Charles Bowden writes in his recent book, "Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 244 pp., \$24), "and I cannot feel alert unless I push past the point where I have control." That is what reading has to offer: a way to eclipse the boundaries, which is a form of giving up control.

Here we have the paradox, since in giving up control we somehow gain it, by being brought in contact with ourselves. "My experience," William James once observed, "is what I agree to attend to" -- a line Winifred Gallagher uses as the epigraph of "Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life" (Penguin Press: 244 pp., \$25.95). In Gallagher's analysis, attention is a lens through which to consider not just identity but desire. Who do we want to be, she asks, and how do we go about that process of becoming in a world of endless options, distractions, possibilities?

These are elementary questions, and for me, they cycle back to reading, to the focus it requires. When I was a kid, maybe 12 or 13, my grandmother used to get mad at me for attending family functions with a book. Back then, if I'd had the language for it, I might have argued that the world within the pages was more compelling than the world without; I was reading both to escape and to be engaged. All these years later, I find myself in a not-dissimilar position, in which reading has become an act of meditation, with all of meditation's attendant difficulty and grace. I sit down. I try to make a place for silence. It's harder than it used to be, but still, I read.

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