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Memory, Fantasy, Neurology: In Praise Of The Physical Book

Books are a storehouse of memories quite apart from their content.

--Roger Rosenblatt

April 2006: In preparation for its summer demolition, the old library on the campus of the university where I've taught for 31 years has begun transferring all of the books to the newly-erected storage blockhouse with its Automated Retrieval System. Two-thirds of the collection is to remain there after the opening of the new library—no longer to be called simply a library, but rather a *learning commons, technology center, and library*. This so-called upgrading of a venerable academic library struck me as unconscionable. The few faculty protests (including my own), had fallen on deaf techno-bureaucratic ears. We were in Silicon Valley; hence we had to prove to our benefactors that we were state-of-the-art in all respects, not just in our School of Engineering.

When the librarians began carting the books off to the storage facility, I decided to bid them farewell. I visited the still-intact philosophy aisles--the *Philosophy Isles*, I thought in a flicker of whimsy, imagining an island utopia where people lived amid palatial libraries leagues away from technopoly's Better Living through Microcircuitry. I bid farewell to Hoerber's *A Scientific Foundation of Philosophy*; to Quine's *Word and Object* and Lepore's *New Directions in Semantics*; to Stewart and Mickunas's *Exploring Phenomenology*; and Vazquez's *The Philosophy of Praxis*; and to William James's *The Meaning of Truth*, the sequel to his classic *Pragmatism*. I pulled this one from the shelf, blew dust from the top, and opened it, delighting in the press of its spine against my palm. "Truth happens to an idea," James said to me across the decades, "It becomes true, is made true by events." I felt my synapses charging up, ready to connect James's insights to a thousand other notions of truth--of the relationship between word and idea, idea and image, image and reality "out there," forever beyond language. A thousand philosophers, semanticists, linguists and theologians on the shelves of this one aisle ready to enter the eternal conversation. I could spend weeks confined to this space alone and be scarcely aware of time's passing, my very consciousness fusing symbiotically with the consciousnesses encapsulated in these volumes.

That is how browsing the stacks can ignite the soul.

READING TRANSPORTS AS IT EMPOWERS; and reading stories from a physical book enables this more pleasurably than reading from a screen because the physical properties of a book stimulate more senses—touch and smell, even hearing (the rustle of pages; the thud a book makes when dropped on a desk) as well as sight, as if underscoring the ideas they embody. I suppose it is possible to establish symbiosis with pixels in plastic, but it would be the minuscule by comparison.

Being engaged in a work of fiction or nonfiction means that you are participating in a very real form of social discourse with the author. The interaction is staged in the mind, of course, but the physical page you hold your hands is also part of the reading experience. I don't mean just hold-

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ing the book or journal in your hands or turning the pages. I am referring to the sensation of the pages on your fingertips, reminiscent of fabric or even of skin (indeed, the pages of codices, books prepared by scribes during the Middle Ages, were often made of sheepskin—sometimes called vellum or parchment). Then there is the heft of the book as you lift it to and from the bookshelf or bedside table or tote bag and nestle it like an infant in your hands or splay it out for reference. Books can be heavy, even unwieldy, more like furniture or *objets d'art* than for practical use. Some books are as large as tables, like a comprehensive world atlas. I *feel* like Atlas whenever I handle one of those enormous books, which must be shelved flat on slanted lectern-like shelves. One of my most cherished books is a folio sized edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four: the Facsimile*, (published, commemoratively, in 1984), containing every extant page of George Orwell's manuscript of this masterpiece. I need both hands to retrieve it from the shelf. When I sit down with it, I am instantly engulfed not only by Orwell's genius and meticulous craftsmanship (the line-by-line editing on many pages reveals an obsession with tone and stylistic grace), but also by the joint publishers' (Secker & Warburg, London; M & S Press, Weston, MA) masterful reproduction of each manuscript page, together with editor Peter Davison's precision typescript transcription facing each of those pages.

Books of exceptionally high quality, such as those routinely produced by the Oak Knoll Press and the Folio Society are expensive but worth every penny because the craftsmanship enhances the reading experience. One moment as I reach for my Folio Society edition of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a 1998 reprinting of V. E. Watts's 1969 translation (Penguin Books, Ltd.), supplemented with seven color plates of illuminated illustrations. I slide the book out of its bright red slipcase and marvel at the title on the cover, rendered medieval script in red, dark blue, and gold, against a parchment-white background. The front and rear endpapers are also parchment-hued. I turn to the frontispiece plate: "Boethius in His Library." At the bottom of the copyright page we have the manufacturing specifications: "Set in 'Monotype' Centaur by Gloucester Typesetting Services. Printed on Caxton Wove paper at Butler and Tanner Ltd, Frome, and bound by them in full Art Vellum, blocked with a design by David Eccles." The texture of this paper is exquisite; it feels and smells . . . *ecclesiastical*, like the interior of a dark Romanesque church. The physical book has brought me into Boethius's world even before I start reading.

We tend to adjust our bodies to suit the book rather than vice versa, except perhaps for paperbacks, which are designed to be bent and folded or otherwise abused. A folio or large quarto will demand that you read it sitting upright or even standing up, keeping it flat on a sufficiently large table or desk or lectern. I always enjoy consulting one of the single-volume unabridged dictionaries strategically placed in libraries; looking up words while standing on one's two feet adds a special dignity to the pursuit. After all, every new word we learn alters our perception of reality, nuances it. The more common octavos (the size of most commercially published novels) invite a reclined position. Think of the way a book can be explored front and back while you're reading it, permitting you to return repeatedly to the jacket copy, the cover art, the index, the illustrations; how a physical book teases you into fluttering through the pages (they make a sound

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similar to rapt breathing). Books are time machines: you can hop, skip, and jump back and forth through the time-frame of the book's universe. And of course the narrative itself, in nonfiction as well as fiction, is often nonlinear, taking you from past to future and back again. I sometimes suspect that one of the charms that books have for people (even though they may not know it consciously) is that they unchain us from time's arrow. A book demonstrates the truth of Blake's universe in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour.

A SYMPHONY OF MENTAL ACTIVITY commences once we begin to read. Reading involves sustained concentration, interaction—and the best readers will make the most of it—that is, will take full advantage of their brain's capacity to absorb knowledge through books. Neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene explains in his 2009 study of the act of reading, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention*, how reading has augmented brain function by recycling primitive neuronal pathways once used for basic survival skills (e.g., reading animal tracks). The tradeoff: a means of acquiring vast amounts of knowledge through the act of deciphering abstract symbols on a page. This may lead to important new insights into teaching children to read and, in turn, to more widespread literacy. "Reading instruction, Dehaene speculates, "must aim to lay down an efficient neuronal hierarchy, so that a child can recognize letters and graphemes and easily turn them into speech sounds. All other aspects of the literate mind—the mastery of spelling, the richness of vocabulary, the nuances of meaning, and the pleasures of literature—depend on this crucial step" (219). I would add that the sensory pleasure of handling books and delighting in the colorful and often fanciful images that children's books provide does much to augment the neuronal processing governing reading that Dehaene describes.

MANY LIKE TO READ BOOKS WITH A PENCIL IN HAND OR WITHIN EASY REACH. There's no telling when you may feel the impulse to talk back to the author or register shock or delight or record a sudden insight or association, either in a notebook or in the margins of the book itself. Abolish from consciousness the librarian's admonition never to write in books. "To love books," proclaims John Maxwell Hamilton defiantly, "is to write in them." Of course, if you're a book collector (and I am one), you may need to engage in some angel-wrestling (and I have). The book collector in me stays my hand: *How dare you even think of scribbling on Caxton Wove paper?* But the avid reader in me wants to participate in the conversation! Is this a resolvable dilemma? It is, but it's rather inconvenient: Whenever feasible I purchase paperbound reading copies (preferably used, at half their retail price) whenever their hard-cover first- or special-printing counterparts have become valuable collectors' items before I've had a chance to read them (examples include David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*; Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Road*; and Hilary Mantel's Man Booker Prize winning *Wolf Hall*). It's a satisfying feeling, writing spontaneously and vigorously in the margins of books. It makes the act of reading seem almost athletic. Books from my college days are riddled with marginalia, accompanied by lots of arrogant double-question marks and triple exclamation marks and asterisks to mark what I considered profoundly insightful or beautifully written and check marks for noteworthy passages. I underlined assertively too: wavy lines to express my disagreement

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(the wavier the lines, the more intense my disagreement); heavy slashes of lines that sometimes cut through the paper to register the opposite; double underlining (often in two colors) to indicate a passage I considered to be of crucial importance; circled words or phrases that I deemed to be poor diction. By the way, I never used highlighters when they became the fad; I loathe the sight of yellow or chartreuse swatches across whole paragraphs—it ruins my ability to absorb the text, maybe because the bright colors make the act of reading seem more like whimsy than a serious mind-meld with the author. Because book margins were seldom wide enough for me to respond as fully as I wanted to, I resorted to radical abbreviations, truncated syntax--much of it now undecipherable.

These days I settle for small penciled check marks and record important passages on index cards or on yellow legal pads, or on loose sheets of various sizes and shapes, such as the backs of desk-calendar pages, or where they should be: in notebooks. I learned from the Canadian scholar H. L. Jackson in her erudite and engaging *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (2001), that scholars' notebooks are formally known by the Renaissance term *adversaria*. Great word, for I can experience considerable adversity in my efforts to navigate through my notes. Consulting my *adversaria* is largely a combination of wild intuition and pure luck because I do not separate my free-wheeling responses to passages from more considered reflections, or these from my bibliographic citations or notes on what I need to do in class the next day or what groceries I need to bring home for dinner. No matter: I derive perverse comfort in sifting through my *adversaria*. Believe me, I've tried to be more systematic, but whatever system I adopt soon metamorphoses into chaos.

Another Canadian, the esteemed novelist Robertson Davies, once conveyed the following reading "heresy" (as he put it) to the students at Yale University in February 1990 as part of his Tanner Lecture there (the lecture appears as Chapter 13 in Davies' *The Merry Heart: Reflections on Reading, Writing, and the World of Books*; 1996): "People who teach reading are dead against what they call 'verbalizing.' If you verbalize you lose time. What time are they talking about? What are you going to do with this time when you have saved it? . . . When you are reading you cannot save time, but you can diminish your pleasure by trying to do so." Davies then calls our attention to the Middle Ages, when people used to read aloud; and because they verbalized "they truly took in—drank in, one might almost say—what they read and it was impressed on their minds forever."

The heresy of reading slowly! Of putting pleasure before utility! We have been conditioned to assume that any human activity is improved by speeding it up, by saving as much time as possible. We need always to return to Robertson Davies' key question:

What are you going to do with your time when you have saved it?

ALBERTO MANGUEL, in *A HISTORY OF READING* (1996), describes how Colette, as a child, would seek refuge at night in her room with her books. "Stretched out in the muffled bed, holding the treasured book in both hands and propping it up on her stomach, she has established not only her own space but her own measure of time." Manguel then points out that not too far from her, "in the Abbey of Fontevrault, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, who died in 1204, lies sculpted in stone on the lid of her tomb,

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holding a book in exactly the same manner” — as the caption alongside the accompanying photograph of Eleanor’s tomb notes, “reading throughout eternity.” That image sends chills down my spine. Books not only transport us across the gulf of consciousness into dreams, but across the gulf of mortality into eternal life.

“We read in bed,” writes Anna Quindlen, “because reading is halfway between life and dreaming, our consciousness in someone else’s head. Holbrook Jackson advises in *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (1950) that we follow the advice of J. C. Squire in choosing for bedtime reading. Such books should be “rambling and discursive . . . neither boring nor too exciting; interesting on every page, but dramatic nowhere, with a stream of event but no definite break.” Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Montaigne’s *Essays*, Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* are among Squire’s recommendations. I would add Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy* (a kind of fictional cousin to Pirsig’s philosophical memoir), the novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Evelyn Waugh, E.M. Forster, Thomas Mann, and Haruki Murakami.

DIANE ACKERMAN TELLS US IN *A NATURAL HISTORY OF THE SENSES* (1990) that “great artists feel at home in the luminous spell of sensation.” My hunch is that book-immersion stimulates creative genius in anyone, not just in great artists--or, I should say, that immersing oneself repeatedly in books day after day, year after year, will turn anyone into a creative genius. Creativity, mind-play, is what being human is all about, and books stimulate mind-play superbly, not only because of their contents, nor the way they affect our senses, but because of the associations we have with them. The neurologist-essayist Oliver Sacks gives a similar account in his 2001 memoir, *Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood*. Sacks describes the impressions the books in his parents’ library had on him when he was growing up, delighting in tomes such as Valentin’s *Practical Chemistry*, dating from the time (circa 1913) when his parents were in medical school--“a workhorse of a book . . . pedestrian in tone, designed as a practical manual, but nevertheless, for me, filled with wonders,” not the least of which were its stains and corrosions and discolorations, “for it had done time in the lab in its day”--or Bland-Sutton’s *Tumours Innocent and Malignant*, containing illustrations of “monstrous teratomas and tumors; Siamese twins joined in the middle; Siamese twins with their faces fused together; two headed calves; a baby with a tiny accessory head near its ear . . . ‘trichobezoars’--bizarre masses full of hair and other stuff, swallowed and embedded . . . in the stomach; an ovarian cyst so large it had to be carried on a handcart . . .” --books that kept young Oliver in a state of horrified fascination and which surely contributed toward his desire to become a physician himself.

Books not only stimulate the senses, they educate them, intertwine them--the musky smell of a century-old geology textbook conjuring up the earthy taste of barley; the frail pages of a hymnal recalling the sounds of a church choir. When lovers shared books, Ackerman writes in *A Natural History of Love* (1994), it increased their sense of intimacy. “Books opened the door to an aviary filled with flights of the imagination, winged fantasies of love....Somewhere in another city or state another soul was reading the same words, perhaps dreaming the same dream.”

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READING IS A WHOLE-BODY ACTIVITY. My wife Terry and I love to read in bed, our preferred transition from the pressure-filled day to nocturnal serenity and dreams. Terry's manner of reading in bed, though, is different from mine. She usually lies on her back, not unlike the immortal Eleanor of Aquitaine, holding the book over her face with both hands, elbows anchored to her ribs. I, however, usually lie scrunched to one side, propped against as many pillows as possible, my head *over* the book--but after twenty minutes or so I'll need to sit up or shift sides. Rarely am I able to stay in one position for very long. Sitting on airplanes drives me nuts; I always make certain I find the most captivating, escapist books to read if a flight is going to last more than forty-five minutes.

I suffer from insomnia, my thoughts breaking into kaleidoscopic fragments as the nocturnal hours drag by. In an effort to grow sleepy, I'll gaze through the darkness at our bookshelves (our bedroom happens to be the Science Fiction / Fantasy / Horror Room) and imagine some of the more grotesque stories among them unfolding in the darkness. Hey, it beats counting sheep. When I do finally nod off, having read in bed and/or imagined stories coming to life helps me to dream more vividly. Rarely is there continuity between book and dream, but many of my dreams are novelistic in their scope and complexity, full of inexplicable movements, encounters, conversations, sudden cinematic scene-shifts.

NOSTALGIA IS ONE OF THOSE SWEET-SORROWFUL FEELINGS we sometimes perversely seek to enhance. It's our way of simultaneously bringing the past into sharper focus while savoring its unbridgeable distance. We really don't want to "go back," to live our lives over again but, like Ebenezer Scrooge escorted by the Ghost of Christmas Past, we long to eavesdrop through the windows at our younger, greener selves in order to relive those moments of bliss or to appreciate with more mature sensibilities those choice moments we never sufficiently appreciated the first time.

As a teenager, I sometimes preferred the company of grownups to anyone my own age. I tried reading grownup books, especially those on scientific subjects. In the 1950s drugstore and grocery store racks were filled with gold-spined Mentor paperbacks published by New American Library; I was drawn to them by their vivid cover illustrations of test tubes and atoms, microscopes, aggie-marble worlds, swirling with colors, observatory domes, spiral galaxies, rockets, equations (the Mentor covers of Rudolf Thiel's *And There Was Light: The Discovery of the Universe*; Fred Hoyle's *Frontiers of Astronomy*--images that to this day I regard as icons of magic. Ironic how icons of *science* can do that! Nostalgia glutton that I am, I've been collecting these Mentor paperbacks for years (they're difficult to find in good condition), regardless of subject matter, and have thus far accumulated more than a hundred of them.

Terry, too, seeks out the books she treasured as a child, like the *Golden Book of Fairy Tales*, with its magnificent illustrations by Adrienne Ségur, like the one on the cover depicting a girl gazing dreamily from her pillow into a forest enclave filled with birds wearing crowns and in which a white-bearded dwarf is gazing up, equally dreamily, at the girl. "Before I'd even learned to read," Terry recalls, "my mother read to me from this book, pausing at the illustrations--but also often making sure that we followed the words as she read them. I think it helped me learn to love the

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very idea of reading. It certainly made me feel comfortable encountering just words on a page." Then there were, for Terry, the Childcraft series of books published by World Book: "I *adored* this 15-volume set, on subjects ranging from profiles of famous people, to geography, to 'mathemagic'. Each volume had its own spine color--funny how something so seemingly trivial can stay with you over the years. Yet the colors help me to recall the pleasure I had reading these books."

Books fill our lives with such a wide range of sensory delights--no wonder we associate them with other sensory experiences. Each book holds a special kind of mirror up to nature--a mirror in which words and images co-mingle with the real world; and what is the real world if not images that register upon our retinas and get tossed into the Scylla-and-Charybdis whirlpools of our creative minds?

These are some of the reasons why libraries should continue to champion physical books, to shelve as many of them as their budgets will allow, to maintain open stacks (sequestering only rare and fragile books), and to retain their dust jackets. The new Technology Center / Information Commons aka library on my campus is spacious and architecturally impressive, but it no longer feels or looks like a library. And the worst thing about the decision to denude the library of its books is that after the new building opened its doors in 2008, the incoming students, fully acclimated to their digital milieu, with few exceptions were not the least troubled by the transformation.