

Michael Milburn

My Back Pages

"Read slowly and mull."

Samuel Pickering

A remedial reading class may be the last place one would expect to find a Harvard freshman, but that's where I was ordered to appear after failing a proficiency test required of all new students. This wasn't supposed to happen. Though I had always been a terrible test taker, English was my strongest subject. My A's in high school literature classes had offset my C's in math and science, and, along with a family legacy, had smoothed my way into Harvard in 1975. Besides, I liked reading, and completed more challenging books in my free time than most of my classmates bothered to open for their courses.

Still, my performance on the test, which measured both speed and comprehension, shouldn't have surprised me. I'm a frustratingly sluggish reader and thinker. Not stupid, just slow to absorb information. Abraham Lincoln once likened his mind to a piece of steel: a great deal of time and effort was required to scratch anything onto it, but once information was there, it was there forever. I like to think that this is true of me, though the stuff that achieves permanence on my piece of steel usually strikes me as trivial: memory fragments, song lyrics, sports statistics, details of celebrities' lives. This tendency to retain the chaff rather than the wheat from what I read turned out to be the worst kind of handicap to bring to Harvard.

It was equally inauspicious to show up afflicted with a glacial reading pace. Harvardians love to estimate the number of words housed in Widener Library, and the university seems intent on cramming as many of these as possible into its students' heads before they graduate. Mostly this force-feeding occurs in the form of massive weekly reading assignments that even some of my professors admitted were beyond anyone's ability to complete on time. This Ivy League ethos of excess persists today. When I taught an English class at Yale, I made a point of giving manageable assignments. My students praised this approach in their course evaluations, but a colleague warned that it would cause the department to regard me as a lightweight. Bleak House one week, Middlemarch the next: this was the stuff of a real Yale syllabus, and the same kind of intellectual machismo that had tormented me as an undergraduate.

Looking back, I can appreciate Harvard's foresight in identifying us dawdlers before we succumbed to its onerous page allotments, but at the time I just felt humiliated. Classes hadn't even begun and I had already been found deficient in the most basic academic skill. Reading was such a reflexive activity that I despaired of learning to do it faster and more absorbently. Besides, weren't these contradictory goals? I could imagine accelerating my pace or memorizing the contents of one paragraph before proceeding to the next, but not mastering both of these feats at the same time.

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The elegantly named "Harvard Reading Course" was little more than a glorified speed reading program, geared toward readers who didn't have time to take in every word. It recommended reading only the first and last sentences of paragraphs, then

writing brief summaries after each chapter. While these tactics helped me to keep up with my assignments, it disoriented me to read for facts, not pleasure, at a gallop, not an amble. The system worked best with writing that placed more importance on content than on style. The first time I tried it on a novel, I gave up immediately—it was like playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony at forty-five RPM so as to get to the Sixth more quickly. After graduation, I reverted to reading the opposite of Harvard's way, lingering defiantly in the middles of paragraphs.

My laboriousness as a reader had begun to frustrate me well before college. My family treated reading as a competitive sport. Whereas most teenagers read extracurricular books for pleasure, I chose according to length or difficulty, trying to keep up with the literary conquests of my father and older siblings. For me, picking a book was like signing up for an old-fashioned sea voyage—I would disappear into it for months. It took me an entire winter to navigate Patrick White's six hundred page The Eye of the Storm, passed down (sadistically, I have come to believe) by my brother Frank. White's novel almost broke me as a reader. Despite its pedigree as a Nobel laureate's masterwork, the book lacked—in my adolescent's opinion—any narrative momentum whatsoever. For three months I never picked it up without forcing myself to, constantly monitored the number of pages remaining, and felt euphorious relief when I reached the end.

Until recently, this was a typical reading experience for me. My tortuous pace turned even profound or interesting books—and if I could revisit White's without breaking out in a rash I'd probably discover that it possesses both of these qualities—into ordeals. Only lately, in middle age, have I begun to avoid books that will consume large chunks of my remaining life. I choose my commitments carefully, excluding practically

everything of five hundred pages or more, scrutinizing reviews for references to the liveliness of the author's style. No longer do I embark upon a volume simply because its information interests me or I want to boast that I have read it. For example, I have always wanted to read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, but probably never will. The months I would spend plodding through it are better spent on several shorter, easier books. Kant might be more edifying, but midway through I'd despair of my slow progress and lack of retention, and long for release.

Periodically, I've tried to accommodate my handicap by gorging on easily consumed books like mysteries and true crime. Maybe I'm a snob, but books like these leave me unsatisfied—if I want pure entertainment I go to a movie or turn on the TV. I like prose that I can savor or at least learn something from, even if this knowledge rarely lasts beyond the book's final page, or, in some cases, the end of a paragraph. Paradoxically, it's my mind's Teflon quality that sustains my appetite for nonfiction—so little sticks that I'm constantly striving to bring my store of information up to a respectable level, like filling a leaky pail.

My other reason for preferring nonfiction is that I finished school self-conscious about my erudition. This may sound odd coming from one with my academic resume, but when my inability to retain facts threatened to ruin my report cards in high school, I loaded my schedule with literature and creative writing electives, then majored in English in college. Novels took me forever to complete, but I was adept at analyzing them. Unfortunately, this attempt to circumvent my affliction left me ignorant not just of math and science, but of whole swaths of history, which I was actually quite interested in. After college, I turned to nonfiction, biographies in particular, to round out my education.

Thirty years after my departure from school, I still read as much to fill in the gaps in my knowledge as to enjoy a good story.

I don't know if this is true of readers primarily concerned with content, but quality of writing dictates how much I will retain from nonfiction. For example, both Richard Holbrooke's memoir of the Balkans conflict, *To End a War*, and Edmund Morris's *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* fascinated me, but only the latter still plays across my mind with the particularity of a memorable movie. Holbrooke settles for bland accuracy even when describing momentous events.

Less than an hour later Frasure, Drew, and I were seated in a high-ceilinged meeting room in the Presidential palace—one of Tito's old offices—in Belgrade. It was a room we would come to know well in the next seven months. Like other such meeting rooms in communist and former communist countries from Beijing to Bratislava, the room tried to make up for its lack of charm by a drab gigantism. The three of us sat on a long sofa. Milosevic took an armchair a few feet from where I sat at the end of the sofa.

In contrast, Morris portrays his historical subject with a vividness worthy of Tolstoy. In this scene from his book's Epilogue, Roosevelt, then vice president, is hiking in the Adirondacks, awaiting news of whether President McKinley has survived an assassination attempt.

The next morning, Friday the thirteenth, was cold and gray: an impenetrable drizzle screened off the mountain above them, and the women and children elected to return to Tahawus. But Roosevelt, who could never resist the highest peak in any neighborhood, in any weather, exhorted his elder male companions to continue climbing with him. Leaving one guide to escort the downward party, he ordered the other to lead his own up into the mists. At about nine o'clock they set off along the cold, slippery trail.

Morris narrates with such immediacy that one would think I'd have sped through his biography, but good writing actually slows my pace. The condition of "losing myself in a book" comes hard to me, and when it happens it's less a matter of avidly turning pages than of dwelling at such length on a passage that my momentum stalls. I'm not admiring language so much as trying to animate it, picturing the people in action, the surrounding sounds and smells.

At 11:52 a.m. Roosevelt found himself on a great flat rock, gazing out (could he but see it!) across the whole of New York State. Rolling fog obscured everything but nearer grass and shrubs....As if in further reward, the clouds unexpectedly parted, sunshine poured down on his head, and for a few minutes a world of trees and mountains and sparkling water lay all around stretching to infinity.

My need to turn language into pictures perplexes me since in most respects I'm utterly non-visual. I can read an entire issue of *The New Yorker* without noticing its cover, and be seated across from a painting without registering what it depicts or even that there is a painting there. Yet I'm lost without a text at poetry readings, and when asked for my opinion feel that I must see the poems in print before I reply. For me, looking at words is an indispensable first step toward seeing what they describe; my visualizations gain traction in this way, allowing me to create a scene that is grounded in language, but infused with my own personality and experience. As Marcel Duchamp said, "the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his own contribution."

Two other motives for my visualizing occur to me. First, we observe the physical world through images rather than through language, so picturing a scene makes me feel that I'm witnessing it first rather than second hand. The best writing facilitates this

translation, whereas purely functional prose keeps its subject rooted in words, the way a map reduces landscape to shadings and lines. The artist Francis Bacon's remarks on painting could apply to literary nonfiction: "One wants a thing to be as factual as possible and at the same time as deeply suggestive or deeply unlocking of areas of sensation other than simple illustration of the object ... Isn't that what all art is about?" Morris's prose serves as a kind of booster rocket propelling me into imaginative orbit; the more his language feeds my imagery, the more vivid and pleasurable his description.

In books such as Morris's, I also visualize in order to secure for myself a fly-on-the-wall vantage on history. My recreation of Morris's closing scene lets me feel that I am standing beside Roosevelt when he learns that he has succeeded to the presidency.

Mists rolled in again, and Roosevelt descended five hundred feet to a little lake called Tear-of-the-Clouds, where his party unpacked lunch. It was about 1:25 in the afternoon.

As he ate his sandwiches he saw below him in the trees a ranger approaching, running, clutching the yellow slip of a telegram. Instinctively, he knew what message the man was bringing.

I visualize scenes from fiction, too, though my pleasure is diminished by the knowledge that what I'm seeing did not happen. Something else compels me to reread these passages as intently as I do nonfiction—perhaps the desire to bask in language, or a technical interest in the craft of writing. The writer Richard Ford recalled of his youth, "being a slow reader admitted me to books at a very basic level, word by word. That doesn't seem like bad preparation to me if writers are essentially people who live in sentences." Whatever my incentive, I approach all prose as if it were poetry, which may further explain my impatience with escapist literature where style is secondary to plot. My lofty standards don't extend to other arts: I condone any number of clichés in the rock

songs I love, and watch movies straight through, never rewinding a DVD to admire acting, editing, set design, or even dialogue.

Unlike nonfiction, fiction doesn't survive in my memory just because it's well-written. In the past few years I've reread *Persuasion*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Jane Eyre*, and still recall them as indistinctly as if I had merely scanned their back covers. Not that I don't retain something from novels and short stories, but it's always for mysterious reasons. For example, I can't account for my verbatim recollection of a seduction scene in Alice McDermott's *Child of My Heart*, a stoned character's thoughts in Tom Perotta's *Joe College*, the last sentence of William Trevor's short story "In Isfahan," or a passage of dialogue from William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. I doubt that I read these words any less alertly or lovingly than I did those of Austen, Tolstoy, or Bronte, but they stuck.

For all the effort I put into choosing books these days, my reading pace has hardly improved, and most of what I learn still fades soon after my eyes have taken it in. At dinner parties, I'm as devoid of ready erudition as I was on that Harvard test thirty years ago. The only useful lesson that remedial reading class taught me is the one it's taken me longest to learn—to trust my capabilities as the best ones for my needs. I've come to believe that there are advantages to the way I read. If pausing to visualize passages means that it takes me twice as long to get through them, who's to say I'm not deriving twice the pleasure? And if my mind sees fit to discard certain facts from its short-term memory, then I'm confident that it's stockpiling more valuable information for long-term use. This must be what Harold Bloom meant when he said "Deep reading demands ... that part of you which is open to wisdom."