

WHAT DO I MEAN BY "SLOW READING?"

--By Lance Fletcher, Home of Slow Reading.

The phrase, "slow reading," is taken from *Daybreak*, a book by Frederich Nietzsche, a German philosopher-philologist. In the preface to Daybreak he writes:

"A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both, I just as much as my book, are friends of lento [in music, a slow passage or movement]. It is not for nothing that I have been a philologist [literally, a lover of words, technically a student of the Classics] perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading.

In the end I also write slowly. Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste - a malicious taste, perhaps? - no longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is 'in a hurry'. For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow. It is a goldsmith's art and connoisseurship of the WORD which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it lento. But precisely for this reason it is more necessary than ever today; by precisely this means does it entice and enchant us the most, in the midst of an age of 'work', that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to 'get everything done' at once, including every old or new book:- this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read WELL, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously , before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers...My patient friends, this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists: LEARN to read me well!"

"I AM A TEACHER OF SLOW READING."

When I was a classroom teacher I took this as my motto, and I would quote it to my students at the beginning of every class. And what I meant was, That is the nature of philosophy. For me philosophy IS the teaching of slow reading.

How does one begin slow reading? You don't. You discover that you have already begun. That is the nature of slow reading. It begins, not with reading, but with slowing. When we begin slow reading, we have already been reading. We are like travelers who have been speeding down the highway when we realize that we have not completely understood a roadsign which we have already passed, and it suddenly occurs to us that we may be going in the wrong direction.

The first lesson in slow reading is to develop the capacity to simply be present to the words on the page; to allow the words to simply BE there, and to take note of the fact that they ARE there --before deciding what they mean. This is something that most students are completely unaccustomed to doing. If you doubt this, make the following test: Read a sentence of eight or ten words to a group of students -- to anybody -- and ask them to reproduce the sentence word for word. My experience has been that almost everybody responds by telling what they thought the sentence meant – in different words, not the same--and in the process, anything incongruous, perplexing or ambiguous--anything, in short, which might be an opening for learning to occur -- tends to be disregarded.

Obviously this is not a lesson that any of us can claim to have learned sufficiently. We are so preoccupied with deciding what the sentences we read and hear MEAN, and especially

with deciding whether WE agree or disagree, whether WE approve or disapprove, that we generally do not pause to take note of what the sentences SAY. This rush to interpretation and judgment is strongly encouraged by most of our educational practices.

Even with the best of intentions, most of us find it extraordinarily hard to "simply be present to the words on the page; to allow the words to simply BE there, and to take note of the fact that they ARE there -- before deciding what they mean." Why is that? Well, perhaps it is because it seems that this is not doing anything. The words, we feel, are perfectly capable of being there on the page without any help from us. They don't need any permission from us to be there, so we feel pretty silly pretending that we are letting them be there on the page. But remember that many of us also feel silly standing in front of a painting, just looking at it, without trying to say what it means.

Perhaps we need to consider again what it is to read. Nowadays most of us have learned to suppress vocalization as we read, and some of us can even read without moving our lips, but I am willing to bet that, for each one of us, when we first learned how to read, reading meant reading out loud. That is, speaking, reproducing, the words exactly as they are on the page. In the first moment of reading, the reader is an actor who unavoidably becomes the voice of the author. So that is where we begin.

The intention of the teaching of slow reading (which is what I understand philosophy to be) is to subvert the customary mode of reading and to afford students (i.e. those who make us the gift of their listening) some critical access to their own interpretive activity. The purpose is not, however, to leave students with the notion that the text means whatever they make it mean. Quite the contrary! By disclosing to students their own act of meaning, the practice of slow reading gives students access to authorial intent. The purpose of the teaching of slow reading is to enter into a conversation with the authors of great works -- those authors whose distinction is that they afford us the opportunity to think things that are worthy of thought.

Here is how I used to approach this sort of thing in a class. When I would begin to teach a course on one of the important texts in philosophy, say Plato's *Republic*, I used to begin by saying, "As you read this book, I want you to assume that it was written by God." This often caused a certain amount of consternation and incipient revolt. Most of the students would suddenly feel that I was trying to dominate and control their minds. "You mean we have to accept what this guy says, even if we don't agree? Even if we think he is wrong?" they would ask.

"Not at all," I would reply. "The purpose of asking you to assume that the text for the course is written by God is to give you the opportunity to learn."

"How so?"

"Well, if you are going to learn, and you are going to learn from the author of this text, then I suppose there must be something you have to learn from that author. Right?"

"I suppose so."

"And what you have to learn from the author, in this case Plato, must then be something about which you know less than Plato. It might even be something about which you have incorrect opinions or assumptions. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"Now, when you read a passage in a book and you find the passage unclear or inconsistent with what you already think, do you immediately say to yourself, "Here is an opportunity for me to learn?"

"Well, not always."

"'Not at all,' would be more like it! What most of us do is to say, 'That guy was confused. He is just making fallacious arguments.' Of course, in the abstract, especially when we are being polite, we say we 'know' that knowledge is supremely desirable. Somebody who took us seriously might suppose, therefore, that when the opportunity to acquire knowledge and get rid of some portion of our ignorance presented itself we would immediately jump at it, as if it were some particularly delicious food which we have long craved. But, in fact, that is not what usually happens, is it? In most cases, when the opportunity to learn is seen close up it looks distinctly unattractive. It is bad news. The reason it is bad news is that the opportunity to learn is always accompanied by the realization that we have hitherto been ignorant and mistaken. Naturally enough, we tend to avoid such discomfort by seeking to shift the blame. 'It's not my fault,' we cry, 'It's the author who is mistaken.'

That, then, points us to the purpose of assuming that the author of our text is God, i.e. a being whose intention may be obscure, but who does not make mistakes. If we adopt the working hypothesis that the author of our text is God, and if we act on that hypothesis when we come to something that appears strange, confusing or wrong, attributing this to errors or ignorance of the author is not an available strategy, so we are driven to look first at the possibility that the confusion reflects our own ignorance."

"But what if the author really IS mistaken? I mean, we can pretend that Plato's dialogues were written by God, but we all know that that isn't really so, and besides I don't even believe in the existence of God. So, by accepting your hypothesis, don't we run the risk of deceiving ourselves and never finding out the truth?"

"Did I ask you to believe anything? To accept anything in the text as true? Not at all. I am not asking you to believe anything the author says. I am asking you to try to think what the author thinks. We are concerned with what we should do when a passage in the text occurs for us as questionable, and I am suggesting that, by supposing the author to be God, the perplexity that occurs for us in the text becomes an occasion for self-examination, an occasion for the discovery of our own ignorance. Yes, I suppose that, at the end of the day, after we have finished our slow reading, I might have to agree that the author of the text was probably a human being capable of making mistakes, not a god. But if we start out operating on the assumption that the text was written by God, by the time we reach the point where we need to consider the author's mistakes, we will have reached a thorough understanding of the questions which the author meant to ask. If we refuse to assume the author's divinity even provisionally, we may never get so far. **And perhaps that -- the knowledge of the questions -- is the real object of philosophical inquiry.**"

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