

Reading, Meaning, and Being

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I am delighted to reply to Kevin Gary's insightful essay on reading.¹ In it, Gary advocates for the recovery of "primitive reading" at a time when it is scarce. This hermeneutic practice, Gary argues, contrasts with the philosophical and scholastic conventions of contemporary liberal education. According to Gary, these conventions are generated from a genealogy in which oral and monastic traditions of exegesis have slowly eroded away.

Because of this dialectic between philosophers and orators, and scholasticism and monasticism, an appropriate reply will require more than purely philosophical and scholastic argumentation. Or, we might consider the limits of the dialectic itself. After all, scholastic philosophers and theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure — both colleagues at the university of Paris during the thirteenth century — were both monks *and* scholastics. I do not see this, or the other quibbles one might imagine, as impediments to Gary's point. The dialectic he employs is a balancing act, not an antagonistic dualism.

I limit my response to a few suggestions. These suggestions do carry bits and pieces of argumentation. At the very least, they will advocate for some things that are perhaps too hidden in Gary's essay. For instance, Gary slightly understates the transformative potential for existential reading that moves beyond the task of hermeneutics and interpretation — and, perhaps, even language itself — and enters the ontological realm of constitution. In other words, if we follow Gary's essay to its most profound end, I think that we would find ourselves reading for more than just "meaning": we would read for *being*. I hope that my suggestions function like adding flour to an already rich gravy and thicken-up the flavors of this already-delicious essay.

It is important to think of food here. There is a longstanding tradition that conceives of reading in exactly this culinary way. In it we find something like Louis Althusser's *interpellation*, subjection via language. However, as Gary notes, there are more ancient traditions of constitutive language, that like Althusser's contention that the subject comes into being through language, make ontological and theological claims like this one: "*In principio erat verbum*" (Jn 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word").

As already noted by Gary, practices of "the Word" have devolved within liberal education. However, this devolution is not purely academic. It is also anthropological. The historical transformation of the human person resulting in the "death of man" we read in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* and, more recently, in the "buffered self" revealed by Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* illustrates this: whatever changes we might find in liberal education are symptoms of wider genealogical and anthropological shifts.

The severity of these changes are aptly conveyed in Gary's opening quote from William Carlos Williams: "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men[sic] die miserably every day for lack of what is found there."² In other words, poetry is matter of life and death; it is not a luxury. In stark contrast to this, we find that the modern human being — you and me, in other words — has developed a remarkably different literary sensibility that is detached from the ancient mythopoetic traditions of the word.

The historian M.T. Clanchy notes, "Traditional monastic reading in particular bore little relation to a modern literate's approach to a book. *Lectio* was more a process of rumination than reading, directed towards savoring the divine wisdom within a book rather than finding new ideas or novel information." Clanchy goes on by quoting Anselm's *Meditation on Human Redemption* where Anselm invites his reader to "Taste the goodness of your redeemer. . . chew the honeycomb of his words, suck their flavor which is sweeter than honey, swallow their wholesome sweetness. Chew by thinking, suck by understanding, swallow by loving and rejoicing."³ In this passage, Anselm alludes to the long tradition of culinary allusions to exegesis that go back at least as far as the Babylonian exile where the prophet Ezekiel wrote: "He said to me 'Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving to you.' Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth" (Ez 3:3).

This sense of literacy is not exclusively religious — taking "religion" in its narrowest sense of a theistic creed. In fact, we find a remarkable convergence of a critical genealogy and a culinary sense of reading in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his introduction to *Genealogy of Morals* he gives instruction on how to read his writing, especially his aphorisms. Nietzsche's belief was that his work was literally unreadable for a modern person polluted by post-Socratic philosophy and Judeo-Christian religion. Instead, Nietzsche thought that his writings were only decipherable by cows; ruminants; beings who knew how to chew things over.

He wrote:

An aphorism, properly stamped and molded, has not been "deciphered" when it has simply been read; rather, one has then to begin its *exegesis*, for which is required an art of exegesis. . . . To be sure, one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an *art* in this way, something that has been unlearned most thoroughly nowadays — and therefore it will be some time before my writings are "readable" — something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case *not* a "modern man": *rumination*.⁴

For Nietzsche, the contemporary recovery of rumination was not a Divine project, but, instead, a challenge to recover the will to power after the death of God. Unlike simplistic caricatures of this divine death, Nietzsche saw the death of God as the greatest existential challenge of our time.

The key word here is "existential." Every tradition of "the Word" that we find in Gary's essay, and in my suggestions here, conceive of "the Word" as more than just language. Reading, then, is not simply a way to understand what words mean. More than that, reading is a form of constitution, a way of becoming a person. This is vividly portrayed in John's prologue: "The Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14). Nietzsche would agree with this. Until words can be read in a way that brings about

an existential incarnation, they are empty shells that leave us malnourished, alienated, and full of *ressentiment*.

If the literal food we eat — and, perhaps more alarmingly, the food that children eat in public schools today — is any sign of the kinds of books we consume; and, furthermore, if the way we eat food is an analogy to how we consume these books, then, we might begin to see the urgency of Gary's message: we are in desperate need of existential re-enchantment through literature.

But who will bring about this re-enchantment? William James asks a similar question in his essay, "What Makes Life Significant": "Where now is our Tolstoi[sic], I said, to bring the truth of all this home to our American bosoms, fill us with better insight, and wean us away from that spurious literary romanticism on which our wretched culture — as it calls itself — is fed?"⁵ Gary's reply is simple and sensible: Perhaps Tolstoy is our Tolstoy. His reply raises this question: Could ruminating over *The Death of Ivan Illych* (and *Brothers Karamozov*) be the hallmark of a liberal education?

Literacy itself has been commodified. It has been decoupled from the genuine art of creativity. It has become a means of production; a human existence that is more like Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, than Nietzsche's superman or Bonaventure's *imagus Dei*. On the other hand, in other more "progressive" cases, shallow forms of nihilistic improvisation have disfigured the art of creativity and made it unable to withstand the rigorous demands of literacy.⁶ What Gary's essay suggests is a remarriage of literacy and creativity grounded in ancient traditions of "the Word" yet allowing the imagination to make the old new.

In closing, I was especially struck by the timeliness of Gary's essay. In our present political climate that celebrates over-caffeinated drinks like tea and coffee, I find this essay's call for "slow, meditative, and primitive reading" as more than just insightful, it is an urgent reminder of what education and philosophy might become in our age of the Tea Party, corporate personhood, and twenty-four hour sensationalistic news: an existential call to love by recovering the lost art of reading for meaning *and* being.⁷

1. For more on reading and liberal education see: Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).

2. William Carlos Williams, *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower and Other Love Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1994), 42.

3. M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 269.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 458–59, (emphasis in original).

5. William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1899), 276–77.

6. For more on creativity and education, see: Martin Buber, "Education," in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1965).

7. For more on love and education see: Samuel Rocha, "A Return to Love in William James and Jean-Luc Marion," *Educational Theory* 59, no. 5 (2009): 579–88.