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In Defense Of The Book - why books are good

William H. Gass

On the enduring pleasures of paper, type, page, and ink

When Ben Jonson was a small boy, his tutor, William Camden, persuaded him of the virtue of keeping a commonplace book: pages where an ardent reader might copy down passages that especially pleased him, preserving sentences that seemed particularly apt or wise or rightly formed and that would, because they were written afresh in a new place, and in a context of favor, be better remembered, as if they were being set down at the same time in the memory of the mind. Here were more than turns of phrase that could brighten an otherwise gloomy page. Here were statements that seemed so directly truthful they might straighten a warped soul on seeing them again, inscribed, as they were, in a child's wide round trusting hand, to be read and reread like the propositions of a primer, they were so bottomed and basic.

Jonson translated or rewrote the quotes and connected them with fresh reflections until their substance seemed his own, and seamlessly woven together, too, which is how the work reads today, even though it is but a collection of loose pages taken, after his death, from the defenseless drawers of his desk. The title, extended in the manner of the period into an explanation, reads, *Timber: or, Discoveries; Made upon Men and Matter: as they have flow'd out of his daily Readings; or had their reflux to his peculiar Notion of the Times; and it is followed by an epigraph taken from Persius' Satires: "To your own breast in quest of worth repair, and blush to find how poor a stock is there."* With a flourish whose elegance is lost on our illiterate era, Jonson fills his succeeding page, headed *Sylva*, with a justification of his title in learned Latin, which can be translated as follows:

(here are) the raw material of facts and thoughts, wood, as it were, so called from the multiplicity and variety of the matter contained therein. For just as we are commonly wont to call a vast number of trees growing indiscriminately "a wood," so also did the ancients call those of their books, in which were collected at random articles upon various and diverse topics, a wood, or timber trees.

My copy of *Discoveries* has its own history. It came from the library of Edwin Nungezer (Catalogue #297), whose habit it was to write his name and the date of his acquisition on the title page (2/22/26), and his name, date, and place, again, at the end of the text, when he had finished reading it (Edwin Nungezer, Ithaca, New York, October 17, 1926). He underlined and annotated the book as a professor might (mostly, with a kind of serene confidence, in ink), translating the Latin as if he knew books like me would follow his lead and appreciate his helpful glosses. I have already quoted one of his interlineations. My marginalia, in a more cautious pencil, are there now too, so that Ben Jonson's text, itself a pastiche drawn from the writings of others, has leaped, by the serendipitous assistance of The Bodley Head's reprint, across the years between 1641 to 1923, not surely in a single bound but by means of a few big hops nevertheless, into the professor's pasture a few years after, and then into mine in 1950, upon the sale of his estate, whereupon my name, with stiff and self-conscious formality, was also placed on its title page: William H. Gass, Cornell, '50. Even so, the book belongs to its scholarly first owner; I have only come into its possession. I hold it in my hand now, in 1999.

Another book, which is also a library but in a different way, George Saintsbury's *A History of English Prose Rhythm*, provides testimony concerning what happens when the guest is taken to a hostelry of transformatory power such as Ben Jonson's inn is:

... the selection, coadaptation, and application of the borrowed phrases to

express Ben's views constitute a work more really original than most utterances that are guiltless of literature.

In setting down the provenance of my copy of Discoveries I have also done the same for the following sentence, which I put a faint marginal line beside while researching opinions about metaphor for my dissertation (now, thank God, a distant memory); it is a sentence that (having served in several capacities since) I know quite by heart, and treasure, inasmuch as it is as personal and particular to me now as its book is, having absorbed so much of myself, like the paper wrapped around fish and chips.

What a deale of cold busines doth a man mis-spend the better part of life
in! in scattering complements, tendring visits, gathering and venting
newes, following Feasts and Playes, making a little winter-love in a darke
corner.

We shall not understand what a book is, and why a book has the value many persons have, and is even less replaceable than a person, if we forget how important to it is its body, the building that has been built to hold its lines of language safely together through many adventures and a long time. Words on a screen have visual qualities, to be sure, and these darkly limn their shape, but they have no materiality, they are only shadows, and when the light shifts they'll be gone. Off the screen they do not exist as words. They do not wait to be reseen, reread; they only wait to be remade, relit. I cannot carry them beneath a tree or onto a side porch; I cannot argue in their margins; I cannot enjoy the memory of my dismay when, perhaps after years, I return to my treasured copy of Treasure Island to find the jam I inadvertently smeared there still spotting a page precisely at the place where Billy Bones chases Black Dog out of the Admiral Benbow with a volley of oaths and where his cutlass misses its mark to notch the inn's wide sign instead.

My copy, which I still possess, was of the cheapest. Published by M. A. Donohue & Co. of Chicago, it bears no date, and its coarse pages are jaundiced and brittle, yet they've outlived their manufacturer; they will outlive their reader--always comforting yet a bit sad. The pages, in fact, smell their age, their decrepitude, and the jam smear is like an ancient bruise; but as well as Marcel did by means of his madeleine, like a scar recalling its accident, I remember the pounding in my chest when the black spot was pressed into Billy Bones's palm and Blind Pew appeared on the road in a passage that I knew even then was a piece of exemplary prose.

That book and I loved each other, and I don't mean just its text: that book, which then was new, its cover slick and shiny, its paper a gleam with the tossing sea and armed, as Long John Silver was, for a fight, its binding tight as the elastic of new underwear, not slack as it is now, after so many openings and closings, so many dry years; that book would be borne off to my room, where it lived through my high school miseries in a dime-store bookcase, and it would accompany me to college too, and be packed in the duffel bag I carried as a sailor. Its body may have been cheaply made by machine, and there may have been many copies of this edition printed, but the entire press run has by this time been dispersed, destroyed, the book's function reduced to its role as my old school chum, whom I see at an occasional reunion, along with editions of Malory and Mann, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Hardy and Spengler, gloomy friends of my gloomy youth. Each copy went forth into bookstores to seek a purchaser it would make fortunate, and each has had its history of success or failure since, years of standing among rarity and leather, say, when suddenly, after a week of weeping that floods the library, it finds itself in some secondhand ghetto, dumped for a pittance by We all customarily callous heirs into a crowd of those said, like cars, to have been "previously owned."

We all love the "previously owned." We rescue them like orphans from their Dickensian dismay. I first hold the volume upside down and give its fanned-out pages a good ruffle, as if I were shaking fruit from a tree: out will fall toothpicks and hairpins, calling cards and bits of scrap paper, the well-pressed envelope for a stick of Doublemint gum, a carefully folded obituary of the book's author, the newsprint having acidulously shadowed its containing pages, or, now and then, a message, interred in the text, as I had flutter from a volume once owned by Arthur Holly Compton (and sold to me by the library of his own university). It was the rough draft of a telegram to the U.S. High Commissioner in charge of our occupation troops in Germany requesting the immediate dispatch of Werner Heisenberg to the United States.

Should we put these feelings for the object and its vicissitudes down to simple sentimental nostalgia? to our commonly assumed resistance to change I think not; but even as a stimulus for reminiscence, a treasured book is more important than a dance card, or the photo that freezes you in mid-teeter at the edge of the Grand Canyon, because such a book can be a significant event in the history of your reading, and your reading (provided you are significant) should be an essential segment of your character and your life. Unlike the love we've made or meals we've eaten, books congregate to form a record around us of what they've fed our stomachs or our brains. These are not a hunter's trophies but the living animals themselves.

In the ideal logotopia, every person would possess his own library and add at least weekly if not daily to it. The walls Of each home would seem made of books; wherever one looked one would only see spines; because every real book (as opposed to dictionaries, almanacs, and other compilations) is a mind, an imagination, a consciousness. Together they compose a civilization, or even several. Utopias, however, have the bad habit of hiding in their hearts those schemes for success, those requirements of power, rules concerning conduct, which someone will one day have to carry forward, employ and enforce, in order to achieve them, and afterward, to maintain the continued purity of their Being. Books have taught me what true dominion, what right rule, is: it is like the freely given assent and labor of the reader who will dream the dreams of the deserving page and expect no more fee than the reward of its words.

A few of us are fortunate enough to live in Logotopia, to own our own library, but for many this is not possible, and for them we need a free and open public institution with a balanced collection of books that it cares for and loans, with stacks where a visitor may wander, browse, and make discoveries; such an institution empowers its public as few do. In fact, it has no rival, for the books in the public library are the books that may take temporary residence in yours or mine. We share their wealth the way we share the space of a public park. And the benefits include the education of the body politic, an education upon which the success of democracy depends, and one that is largely missing from the thrill-seeking, gossip-mongering, and mindless masses who have been content to place their governing, as well as their values, faiths, and future plans, in the hands of the crudest commercial interests. The myths that moved us to worship in ways preferred and planned by the Church, or to feel about things in a manner that served the interests of the State, have less power over our souls now than the latest sale of shoes, which promise, through the glory of their names, the pleasures of sex and health and social rank, and give new meaning to the old expression "leap of faith."

My high school had no library worthy of the name "book," so I would walk about a mile downtown to the public one to borrow, in almost every case, a new world. That's what a library does for its patrons. It extends the self. It is pure empowerment. I would gather my three or four choices, after deliberations governed by ignorant conjecture, and then, before leaving, I would sit at one of the long wide tables we associate with the institution now and read a page or two farther than I had while standing in the stacks. I scorned the books deemed appropriate for my age and selected only those I wouldn't understand. Reading what I didn't understand was, for one blissful period of my life, the source of a profound if perverse pleasure. I also liked to look at the card pasted in the back of the book to record previous borrowings--a card that is, like so much other information, there no longer or discreetly incomplete. It gave me a good deal of satisfaction to be taking home some rarely read, symbolically dusty, arcane tome. I checked out both my books and my pride at the same desk. See, O world, what I am reading and be amazed: Joyce, Wells, Carlyle. Well, Wells I could understand. That, I would realize later, was what was the matter with him.

And the Saturday that Ulysses was denied me because my ears were too young to hear its honesty was a large red-letter day, burned upon my symbolic bosom wherever it was then kept, for on that day I learned what righteous indignation was; I realized what libraries were really for, just in the moment that my own was failing its function.

Public libraries have succumbed to the same pressures that have overwhelmed the basic cultural functions of museums and universities, aims that should remain what they were, not because the old ways are always better but because in this case they were the right ones: the sustaining of standards, the preservation of quality, the conservation of literacy's history, the education of the heart, eye, and mind. Now libraries devote far too much of their restricted space, and their limited budget, to public amusement. It is a fact of philistine life that amusement is where the money is.

Universities attract students by promising them, on behalf of their parents, a happy present and a comfortable future, and

these intentions are passed along through the system like salmonella until budgets are cut, research requirements are skimped, and the fundamental formula for academic excellence is ignored if not forgotten. That formula is: a great library will attract a great faculty, and a great faculty will lure good students to its log; good students will go forth and win renown, endowments will increase, and so will the quality of the football team, until original aims are lost sight of, academic efforts slacken, the library stands neglected, the finer faculty slip away, good students no longer seek such an environment, and the team gets even better.

The sciences, it is alleged, no longer use books; neither do the professions, since what everyone needs is data, data day and night, because data, like drugs, soothe the senses and encourage us to think we are, when at the peak of their heap, on top of the world. Of course, libraries contain books, and books contain information, but information has always been of minor importance, except to minor minds. What matters is how the information is arranged, how it is understood, and to what uses it is put. In short, what matters is the book the data's in. I just employed the expression "It is a fact of philistine life ...". That is exactly what the philistine would like the library to retrieve for it. Just the facts, ma'am. Because facts can be drawn from the jaws of some system like teeth; because facts are goods like shoes and shirts and, well, books. This week the library is having a closeout sale on facts about deserts. Get yours now. Gobi will be gone soon, the Sahara to follow.

Frequently, one comes across comparisons of the electronic revolution with that of writing and printing, and these are usually accompanied by warnings to those suspicious of technology that objections to these forward marches are both fuddy-duddy and futile. But Plato's worries that writing would not reveal the writer the way the soul of a speaker was exposed; that spontaneity would be compromised; that words would be stolen (as Phaedrus is about to steal them in that profound, beautifully written dialogue), and words would be put in other mouths than those of their authors; that writing does not hear its reader's response; that lying, hypocrisy, false borrowing, ghost-writing, would increase so that the hollow heads of state would echo with hired words; and that, oddly, the advantages and powers of the book would give power and advantage to the rich, who would learn to read and would have the funds to acquire and keep such precious volumes safe: these fears were overwhelmingly realized.

The advent of printing was opposed (as writing was) for a number of mean and self-serving reasons, but the fear that it would lead to the making of a million half-baked brains, and cause the illicit turning of a multitude of untrained heads, as a consequence of the unhindered spread of nonsense was a fear that was also well founded. The boast that the placement of books in many hands would finally overthrow superstition was not entirely a hollow hope, however. The gift gave a million minds a chance at independence.

It was the invention of photography, I remember, that was supposed to run painters out of business. What it did, of course, was make artists out of them, not grandiose or sentimental describers. And the pixelation of pictures has rendered their always dubious veracity as unbelievable as any other skill for a system. If blessings are mixed, so are calamities. I note also that although the horse-drawn coach or wagon nowadays carries rubes in a circle around Central Park, there are more horses alive and well in the world than there ever were.

So will there be books. And if readers shut their minds down the better to stare at pictures that rarely explain themselves; and if readers abandon reading to swivel-hip their way through the interbunk, picking up scraps of juicy data here and there and rambling on the e-mail in that new fashion of grammatical decay, the result will be to make real readers, then chief among the last who are left with an ability to reason, rulers. Books made the rich richer. Books will make the smart smarter.

The elevator, at first, seemed merely helpful, and the high-rise splendid against the night sky--what you could see of it. Recordings allow us to hear a few elevating strains from the "Ode to Joy" several times a day, the genius long ago beaten out of it. And those miracles of modern electronics that have allowed us to communicate quickly, easily, cheaply, gracelessly with every part of the world permit us to do so in private and in every remove from face to face. Air travel is comfortable, affordable, and swift (right?) and enables us to ignore geography, just as we ignore climate, because we have HVAC and, in addition, can purchase terrible tomatoes any season of the year from stores that are open all night.

Books in libraries, however awful some of them assuredly are, have been screened by editors who have a stake in their quality and their success. Once on shelves, they may receive from readers the neglect they deserve. But at the end of all

those digital delivery channels thrives a multitude of pips whose continuous squeaking has created static both loud and distressing. Amid the sound of a million popoffs, how shall we hear and identify a good thought when it pops out?

The library is meant to satisfy the curiosity of the curious, offer to stuff students with facts, provide a place for the lonely where they may enjoy the companionship and warmth of the word. It is supposed to supply handbooks for the handy, novels for insomniacs, scholarship for the scholarly, and make available works of literature to those individuals they will eventually haunt so successfully; these readers, in self-defense, will bring them finally to life.

More important than any of these traditional things, I think, is the environment of books the library puts its visitors in and the opportunity for discovery that open stacks make possible. When I wish to look up a word--"golliwogg," which I've encountered spelled with two g's--or when I wish to plenish my mind with some information, say, about the ill-fated Library at Alexandria, why don't I simply hit the right keys on my machine, where both a dictionary and an encyclopedia are imprisoned? Well, I might, if the spelling of "golliwog" were all I wished to know, if researches, however large or small, were not great pleasures in themselves, full of serendipity; for I have rarely paged through one of my dictionaries (a decent household will have a dozen) without my eye lighting, along the way, on words more beautiful than a found fall leaf, on definitions odder than any uncle, on grotesques such as "gonadotropin-releasing hormone" or, barely above it--what?--"gombeen," which turns out to be Irish for usury. I wonder if Ezra Pound knew that.

Similarly, when I walk through the library stacks in search of a number I have copied from the card catalogue, my eyes are not watching my feet or aimlessly airing themselves; they are intently shelf-shopping, running along all those intriguing spines, all those lovely shapes and colors and sizes. That is how, one day, I stopped before a thick yellow-backed book that gave its name in pale blue letters: The Sot-Weed Factor. Although published by Doubleday, so there was probably nothing of value in it, I still pulled the book from its place. What did the title mean? I read the first page, as is my habit. Page 1 and page 99 are my test spots. Then I bore it home, neglecting to retrieve the book for which I had begun my search. Instead, for two days, in a trance of delight and admiration, I read John Barth's novel. That is why I stroll through the encyclopedia, why I browse the shelves.

One does not go to a library once, look around, and leave as if having seen it. Libraries are not monuments or sights or notable piles: churches by Wren, villas by Palladio. Libraries, which acquire the books we cannot afford, retain the many of which we are ignorant, the spate of the new and the detritus of ancient life; libraries, which preserve what we prize and would adore; which harbor the neglected until their time to set forth again is marked, restoring the worn and ignoring fashion and repulsing prejudice. Libraries are for life, centers to which we are recycled, as recursive as reading itself.

If I am speaking to you on the phone, watching your tinted shadows cross the screen, downloading your message from my machine, I am in indirect inspection, in converse, with you; but when I read the book you've written, you are as absent as last year, distant as Caesar's reign. Before my eyes, asking for my comprehension, where I stand in the stacks or sit in the reading room, are your thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, set down in sentences and paragraphs and 996. pages ... but in words not yours, meanings not mine, rather words and meaning meanings that are the world's.

Yes, we call it recursive, the act of reading, of looping the loop, of continually returning to an earlier group of words, behaving like Penelope by moving our mind back and forth, forth and back, reweaving what's unwoven, undoing what's been done; and language, which regularly returns us to its origin, which starts us off again on the same journey, older, altered, Columbus one more time but better prepared each later voyage, knowing a bit more, ready for more, equal to a greater range of tasks, calmer, confident. After all, we've come this way before, have habits that help and a favoring wind; language like that is the language that takes us inside, inside the sentence--inside--inside the mind--inside--inside where meanings meet and are modified, reviewed, and revised, where no perception, no need, no feeling or thought, need be scanted or shunted aside.

I read around in this reprinted book I've rescued until I stumble on--I discover--my sentence, my marvel, my new found land.

What a deale of cold busines doth a man mis-spend the better part of life

in! in scattering complements, tending visits, gathering and venting
news, following Feasts and Playes, making a little winter-love in a darke
corner.

This sentence is a unit of human consciousness. It disposes its elements like the bits and pieces of a collage, and even if a number of artists were given the same materials: say, a length of ribbon, empty manila folder, cellophane wrapping, sheet of blue paper, postage stamp, shocking-pink crayon; or a number of writers were allowed a few identical words and asked to form a phrase--with "was," for instance, out of "that," or "fair," or "then," and "all"--they'd not arrange them in the same way, make the same object, or invariably ask, in some wonder, "then was all that fair?" as if a point were being made in a debate. Among them, only James Joyce would write of paradise, in *Finnegans Wake*, "then all that was, was fair."

In this process of constituting a unit of human perception, thought, and feeling, which will pass like every other phase of consciousness into others--one hopes--still more integrated and interesting, nothing is more frequently overlooked or more vital to language than its pace and phrasing: factors, if this were ballet, we would never neglect, because we are well aware how the body of the dancer comes to a periodic point of poise before beginning another figure; and how the central movement of the torso is graced and amplified by the comportment of the arms, the tilt of the head and smile of the eyes; and how the diagram of one gesture is made to flow into another; and how the dancer must land from a leap, however wide or high, as if a winged seed; and how the energy of movement is controlled by the ease of its execution within the beat and mood and color of the music until we see one unified flow of expression. So too must the language keep its feet and move with grace, disclosing one face first before allowing another, reserving certain signals until the end, when they will reverberate through the sentence like a shout down a street, and the vowels will open and close like held hands, and the consonants will moan like maybe someone experiencing pleasure, and the reader will speed along a climbing clause, or sigh into a periodic stop full of satisfaction at this ultimate release of meaning: a little winter-love in a dark corner.

Every day, from the library, books are borrowed and taken away like tubs of chicken to be consumed, though many are also devoured on the premises, in the Reading Room, where traditionally the librarian, wearing her cliches, shushes an already silent multitude and glares at the offending air. Yet there, or in someone's rented room, or even by a sunny pool--who can predict the places where the encounter will occur?--the discovery will be made. And a finger will find the place and mark it before the book's covers come closed; or its reader will rise and bear her prize out of the library into the kitchen, back to her dorm room, or, along with flowers and candy, to a bedside, in a tote bag onto the beach; or perhaps a homeless scruffy, who has been huddling near a radiator, will leave the volume behind him when he finally goes, as if what his book said had no hold on his heart, because he cannot afford a card. Yet, like Columbus first espying land, each will have discovered what he or she cares about, will know at last what it is to love--a commonplace occurrence--for, in the library, such epiphanies, such enrichments of mind and changes of heart, are the stuff of every day.

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