How to Read

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... (Friedrich Nietzsche, Preface to *Daybreak* (1886))

Reading might seem as easy as A, B, C, or might seem to be something that you do unthinkingly, like breathing or walking or, perhaps, talking. Once you have learnt to do it reading becomes ‘second nature’. We are bombarded by written messages every day and those of us who have successfully learnt to read at a young age and who do not suffer from dyslexia or a visual impairment tend hardly to notice the sheer amount of written stuff that we process every waking hour. And the experience of being carried away by a book, being ‘lost in a book’, seems to confirm the sense that reading is something that can happen more or less automatically, something about which you hardly need to think.

Most of the time, reading just happens. You are reading a newspaper, a cereal packet, a road sign, an advertising leaflet, a menu, and scarcely give it a moment’s thought. You want the information, and you want it now. But to read a poem or to read certain kinds of novels or plays or literary essays or short stories, is not to read just for information, and it is sometimes not to read for information at all. Instead, you are reading for a voice, tone or texture, for intriguing effects of language, for the way that the writer does things with words and the way that such texts seem to foreground the very experience of reading – the question of what reading is and how it works (and perhaps sometimes fails to work).

It is this rather specialized way of reading that we are interested in here. Our intention is to offer tips on reading literary texts – as well as to suggest new ways of thinking about this familiar but perhaps also oddly unpredictable activity. In particular, we want to talk quite a
lot about ‘close reading’ – reading, as the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche idiosyncratically puts it, ‘with delicate eyes and fingers...’ (Nietzsche 1997, 5). Extensive reading and even skim-reading is an essential dimension of studying literature, and our advice would be to read as much and (when necessary) as fast as possible. But ‘close reading’, reading carefully, slowly, ‘with delicate eyes and fingers’, really is what matters. Of course, you might ask how close is close or how slow is slow. The critic and literary theorist Paul de Man cites a brief dictum from Pascal’s Pensées (1670) as an epigraph to his 1979 book Allegories of Reading – an aphorism which might give us pause: ‘When one reads too quickly or two slowly’, Pascal declares, ‘one understands nothing’.

Well, you can’t win, it seems. So what would it mean to ‘read well’? In the first place, it means to read with attention not only to what the text says but to how it is saying it, to the linguistic and rhetorical effects of a work, to its literary ‘form’, as well as to its sense. It is this double reading or dividing of attention, indeed, which characterizes literary study. When you read a novel or poem or play, for example, it is all about the way things are put, all about language, about the way words work.

Let’s try to illustrate this by turning to a poem. By clicking on the title below, you can read W.H. Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ (1938), a poem about looking at pictures in a museum, and about the relationship between art and suffering. We would ask you to read the poem and then turn back to our discussion.

Despite the somewhat daunting foreignness of its title, the language of Auden’s poem seems to be very straightforward, indeed it seems almost un-poetical. The poem doesn’t include many of the kinds of metaphors, specialized or ‘poetic’ diction, regular rhythm and other rhetorical effects that one tends to associate with poetry. Although the word order is inverted in line 1 (‘They were never wrong about suffering’ would be more usual in speech than
‘About suffering they were never wrong’), you could almost mistake the poem for a version
of someone speaking, informally commenting on some paintings in a museum. Look, for
example, at the way that the subject of the poem, ‘The Old Masters’, is introduced as if as an
afterthought, parenthetically in line two; or at the way that the extended fourth line strolls
rather casually, even quite dully, from one ordinary action to another. Like much modernist
verse, the poem strives for a certain ordinariness or ‘naturalness’ of language, evoking
everyday speech patterns, while being, at the same time, highly crafted. And perhaps that is
no surprise: after all, the poem is itself about ordinariness, about the way that things just carry
on even if a calamitous or momentous or amazing event is occurring nearby. You can get a
sense of this odd combination of the ordinary and the amazing by looking at how the rhymes
work. Although it is easy to miss, the poem does mostly rhyme: in fact, only line 3 is
unrhymed (no word rhymes with ‘place’). But the rhyme-scheme is so complex and irregular
that you could easily overlook this aspect of the poem. The rhyme-scheme of the first section
runs: ABCADEDBFGFGE. Through its rhyme-scheme the text both acknowledges and
conceals its specialness. The poem does rhyme, but irregularly (line one rhymes with line
four, but line two has to wait until line eight for its rhyme, and so on). We might also note the
seemingly ‘natural’ rhythm of the language and the variation in stressed and unstressed
rhyme-words. Crucial to all these effects is the marvellously quirky enjambment – lines that
end without punctuation or pause, where the sense runs on against the suspension of the line-
ending. Along with their casualness, there is an air of apparent artfulness about the line-
endings that ramifies the hazards and coincidences of life that the poem is contemplating.
Part of Auden’s achievement in constructing this poem, in other words, has to do with the
intricate and subtle ways in which he exploits the sound-effects of verse to suggest that things
are a matter at once of chance and device, that the world and the poem are at once poetic and
prosaic, both remarkable, something amazing, and unremarkable.
And that is what the poem is about: paying attention – finding things remarkable or not. The poem is in the venerable tradition of ‘ekphrastic’ poems – poems that try to evoke paintings, sculptures or other visual works (‘ekphrasis’ is a technical word that originates in the Greek for ‘description’ and is used for the attempt by a work in one medium to represent a work in another). The poem asserts that the ‘Old Masters’ alert us to something important about humanity – that a momentous event for one individual (his birth, for example, or his death) is ‘never’ of much consequence to unrelated bystanders. Something remarkable, tragic, appalling happens to someone while for others in the vicinity life just goes on, unperturbed. 

But how does painting, or art more generally, relate to this? In the first section of the poem, the speaker describes two unnamed paintings from the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, one of which seems to depict the birth of Christ (the ‘miraculous birth’) and the other his crucifixion (the ‘dreadful martyrdom’). The speaker is struck by the way that these world-changing events happen against the background of children blithely skating, dogs doing what dogs do, and the torturer’s horse being more concerned with an itch on its backside than about what its master might be up to. These animals and children don’t care, and why should they? The second part of the poem more specifically concerns a painting in the same museum supposedly by the sixteenth-century Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel (c.1527-69), entitled Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (1569). The painting depicts the death of the mythological figure of Icarus, whose father, Daedalus, had made his son wings of feathers bound together with wax. Although his father had warned him not to fly too near the sun for fear that the wax will melt, Icarus does so and, with his wings disintegrating, he falls into the sea. In Auden’s poem, the speaker comments on the way that in Bruegel’s painting a ship

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1 The painting is still there. But if you can’t visit the museum, you can see a reproduction of it on the museum’s website (http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/site/EN/frames/F_online.html) or for example here: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/5e/Bruegel%2C_Pieter_de_Oude_-_De_val_van_icarus_-_hi_res.jpg/800px-Bruegel%2C_Pieter_de_Oude_-_De_val_van_icarus_-_hi_res.jpg
sails ‘calmly on’, ignoring this momentous event (momentous for Icarus, since he dies, but not of much consequence to anyone else, it seems).

As critics such as James Heffernan have pointed out, one of the interesting things about Auden’s poem is that, unlike the Old Masters, the speaker is wrong – wrong in particular about the Old Masters (Heffernan 2004, 147). While Bruegel’s painting does indeed build on Ovid’s account in the *Metamorphoses* to highlight the way in which the death of Icarus has minimal impact on the rest of the world, there are plenty of paintings by Old Masters in which suffering is put centre-stage and made the focus of general attention. You might think, for example, about the way that the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746-1828) is explicitly concerned with what it means to suffer, with the horrors of the brutality of war, and with what it means to come across or to be a spectator at another’s suffering. There is no sense that anyone is looking away from the suffering individuals in his ‘Disasters of War’ series (1810-20), paintings in which the combination of inhuman brutality and human suffering is the central and even sole topic.²

Auden’s poem also intersects with other traditions. There is a moment in the Mike Newell film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) when someone recites another famous Auden poem also from 1938, called ‘Funeral Blues’. The poem, often known by part of its first line as ‘Stop all the clocks’, figures mourning as the impotent desire for the whole world to stop because the person one loves has died. ‘Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone, / Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone’, the poem begins, ‘Silence the pianos and with muffled drum / Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come’. This is no doubt an experience many of us have shared and will share – the sense of being appalled that the world simply goes on regardless when someone close to you has died. ‘What is wrong with people that they can just go on with their ordinary, unremarkable lives, in the face of this

²You too can be a spectator at Goya’s depiction of others’ suffering, for example at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Los_desastres_de_la_guerra](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Los_desastres_de_la_guerra)
catastrophe?’, we might find ourselves wondering, in incredulity. As Jacques Derrida once remarked of this kind of grief and incredulity, ‘There is no common measure able to persuade me that a personal mourning is less grave than a nuclear war’ (Derrida 2007, 403). And this indeed is one of the foci of the elegiac tradition – the tradition of poems of mourning.

Because his friend and fellow poet Edward King has died, Milton argues, even nature itself is in mourning: ‘…thee the woods, and desert caves, / With wild thyme and the gadding vine o’ergrown, / And all their echoes mourn’ (‘Lycidas’ (1638), ll.39-41). In ‘Adonais’ (1821), Shelley’s speaker laments the fact that his grief ‘returns with the revolving year’ even while ‘The amorous birds now pair in every brake’ and while ‘A quickening life from the Earth’s heart has burst / As it has ever done’ (‘Adonais’, ll.155, 159, 164-5). In a more domestic vein, Alfred Tennyson asks in *In Memoriam* (1850) ‘How dare we keep our Christmas-eve[?]’, when he has ‘such compelling cause to grieve’ the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam (section 29). The tradition of remarking on the disjunction between the insouciance of others, even of nature, and our own grief is alluded to in Derek Walcott’s sequence of elegies for his mother in his 1997 collection The Bounty. There is ‘the traffic of insects going to work anyway’, as he puts it, and there is a sense of ‘astonishment’ even ‘that earth rejoices / in the middle of our agony’ (Walcott 1997, 3, 14). And there is also something perhaps even harder to bear: our tendency to forget our grief just as and even just because we try to memorialize it in a formal elegy: ‘pardon me’, Walcott asks plaintively and self-reflexively, ‘as I watch these lines grow and the art of poetry harden me // into sorrow as measured as this’ (5). But the sentiment may also be said to represent a form of narcissism, a troubled realization that the world doesn’t revolve around your existence and therefore around your grief or suffering.

So ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ connects with ‘Funeral Blues’ and with the elegiac tradition more generally by highlighting and putting into question a narcissistic fantasy about being at the centre of the world, about the desire for the world to take note, to notice you. In the former
poem, the speaker’s (erroneous) idea about the profundity of the Old Masters’ understanding of the human predicament, their understanding, always, that human suffering goes unnoticed, can then be seen as part of a concern about being and not being noticed.

This is a way of reading ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’: we have begun to try to tease out the thematic core of the poem, the poem’s ‘message’ (as it is sometimes crassly called), or its ‘theme’, what it ‘says’ or what it is about, and we have remarked on its links with other poems in the elegiac and ekphrastic traditions. And we might join other critics in linking the poem to its historical contexts. A number of critics have suggested that the ignored or disregarded suffering that Auden alludes to in his poem includes the Spanish Civil War, for example, in which he had been personally involved, as well as the rise of Hitler in the 1930s, and other events of what, in his poem ‘1 September 1939’, he calls that ‘low dishonest decade’ (see Cheeke 2008, 107-8). Considering the question of the historical resonance and suggestiveness of Auden's poem is one way of thinking about what makes it so striking and memorable. The poem is about the nature of examples, but it is more than merely an example. It points beyond itself. Indeed we could say that one of the most forceful underlying arguments of the poem is that it is always necessary to take context into account but that context is always larger and more complex than the point of view of any single individual. So ‘context’ or ‘history’ is necessary, necessary for reading, but has its own dangers, one of which is that in order to talk about that context, one can end up doing little more than reducing the poem to a paraphrase of itself. And what’s wrong with paraphrase? Well, there’s a famous essay by the ‘New Critic’ Cleanth Brooks called ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’ (Brooks 1949), in which Brooks argues powerfully and influentially that a poem should not be understood to have a propositional content in the way that, say, this sentence or a newspaper story does. As Archibald MacLeish famously puts it at the end of his ‘Ars Poetica’ (1926), ‘A poem should not mean / But be’ – although as MacLeish also rather less
famously says in that poem, ‘A poem should be wordless / As the flight of birds’, which does rather make you wonder how seriously to take it (for the record, ‘Ars Poetica’ contains 129 words...). Anyway, Brooks argues that to try to ‘extract’ the content or meaning from a poem, to attempt simply to paraphrase it, is a kind of ‘heresy’, a fundamental error, since it is in the very nature of literary texts that what they say is bound up with how they say it. We would want to complicate this idea by saying that paraphrase is often helpful, even necessary, but that a reading of a literary text should start rather than stop there. Paraphrase should always be approached with caution. After all, like translation, strictly speaking, it is impossible. You can’t paraphrase without altering. As Bill Readings memorably puts it, ‘paraphrase is a philosophical joke’ (Readings 1991, xxi). And even if you could do it, just paraphrasing anyway doesn’t get you very far.

So what else can you do with a poem? How else can you read a literary text? We have already started to look at the language and rhetorical structures of Auden’s poem, in talking about its linguistic plainness or ‘naturalness’ – with respect to the syntax and lexical details in particular – and about the way it rhymes but at the same time seems to resist regular and overt rhyming. But this is the trick, the fundamental premise of ‘close reading’, the point above all that we want to reinforce: vocabulary, syntax and rhetorical effects cannot be distinguished from a poem’s meaning. The rhyme-scheme will tell us very little unless we can link that feature persuasively to a consideration of other aspects of what the poem is doing, and above all to how it makes meaning. What Auden’s poem ‘means’ has to do with the way that the seeming casualness of the apparently un-‘poetic’ voice interacts with the poem’s veiled poeticalness. And here’s the rub: we have suggested that the speaker is wrong to declare that the ‘Old Masters’ have only one approach to suffering. In the ‘real world’, so to speak, and especially if the speaker was, say, an art critic, that error would be a problem. When art critics make generalizations about paintings or about the ‘Old Masters’ they are supposed to
get things right, or at least to speak with a certain credibility – that, after all, is their job. But when poets make demonstrably false propositional statements, the erroneousness of their assertions only serves to complicate and enrich the experience of reading. Poems and other literary texts don’t, in a sense, make propositional truth claims – or if they do, those claims should themselves be understood as rhetorical tropes. To put it bluntly, it doesn’t matter whether or not the statement the speaker makes is right, any more than it matters whether Jane Austen’s famous generalization at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* (‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife’) is true. In fact, Austen’s statement is effective precisely to the extent that it is questionable (particularly as a truth *universally* acknowledged): until Austen wrote this sentence the sentiment was anything but ‘universally acknowledged’. It was perhaps more generally acknowledged afterwards, at least among a certain social class, in a certain historical period – these days, after all, we would be more likely to say ‘...must be looking for a good time’. And in that sense, the sentence is ‘performative’: it performs or produces what it presents itself as only describing. But we are still perhaps enticed and indeed even charmed by the grand, if somewhat complacent authority of the narrator’s voice. What Austen is doing at the beginning of her novel is not so much expressing a universal truth as establishing for her narrator a certain voice or indeed a persona. Like Austen’s opening, Auden’s statement about the Old Masters opens up a whole series of questions that are fundamental to reading. First, there are questions of voice and authorship: who is speaking? to what extent are these views the poet’s own? whose voice is this? Second, there is the question of sincerity and intentionality: does the speaker mean what he says? does Auden? what does Auden want to convey? Third, there is irony: should we be alert for the distinction between what is said and what is meant? in other words, does the poem say one thing and mean another? Fourth, there is form and content: how do technical factors such as the rhyming, alliteration, enjambment
and so on participate in the sense? And finally, there is interpretation: how should we construe this poem’s sentences? how can we ensure that our reading is accurate, valid, credible? Careful attention to these questions, and especially to distinctions such as those between poet and speaker or author and persona, is fundamental to effective critical reading.

So we are left with a poem that makes a bold, assertive statement but that is also about the act of making bold assertive statements, and with a poem that raises questions (about voice and intention and meaning and irony and so on) without necessarily resolving them. Indeed, what we have is a sense of tension or paradox or uncertainty with regard to the poem’s meaning or its meaningfulness. The poem seems to be utterly lucid, transparent, interpretatively straightforward. But that very simplicity generates hermeneutic or interpretative problems. There is a fundamental strangeness about the way in which the poem moves between the particular and the general. We need to respond to the ways in which the poem is general (it is about poetry, painting, suffering, and so on). And at the same time we need to acknowledge the particularity or singularity of the poem. We need to try to do justice to the fact that ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ is untranslatable, unparaphrasable. This relationship between the general and the singular was noted by Aristotle in his Poetics more than two thousand years ago. But it is a principle that has been reinvented, rediscovered, restated in different ways ever since – by (among others) Sir Philip Sidney in the sixteenth century, Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Hegel in the nineteenth century, and W.K. Wimsatt and Jacques Derrida in the twentieth century. Briefly, in the Poetics Chapter Nine, Aristotle argued that unlike history, which seeks to record and account for single, individual and essentially unrepeatable events, but also unlike philosophy, which is based on the establishment of universal truths without regard for the singularity of the event, poetry is about both the particular or individual or singular and the general or ‘universal’. In this context we might notice, then, the rather strange ways in which Auden’s
poem involves both very large generalizations (about all the Old Masters being right about something all of the time) and three very specific examples. What happens in ‘Museé des Beaux Arts’ is that a general statement is made and then exemplified. But in exemplifying the statement, the speaker seems to get caught up, lost even, in the detail, in the particularities of the paintings, and especially with respect to Bruegel’s painting of the fall of Icarus. We might thus consider, for example, the strangeness of those white legs in Bruegel’s painting as they disappear into the sea. (In another reading, indeed, we might have focused more sharply on the figure of this ‘amazing’ boy, in order to explore the homoerotic dimensions of Auden’s poem.)

And this, in a sense, is what happens to us – or what could or should or might happen to us – in reading Auden’s poem. Although we start out wondering what it means, what ‘message’ is being conveyed, we quickly get drawn in by the verbal and rhetorical effects, by the language, in short by how something is being said rather than simply what is being said. We might think here about anaphora, the rhetorical figure for the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines or clauses. Once you have noticed it, for example, it is difficult to ignore how insistently the poem alerts us to the strangeness of the ‘how’: ‘how well they understood’, ‘how it takes place’, ‘How when the aged…’, ‘Anyhow in a corner’, ‘how everything turns away’. All of which is to say that this is a poem about how to read. It is about reading paintings, about trying to interpret them, and getting lost, caught up in the details.

And this brings us to our final point about reading. People, including many critics and theorists, often seem to assume that there is a clear and final distinction between the practice of reading, close reading in particular, and literary theory. Indeed, people often seem to suppose that there is a sense in which close-reading and literary theory are mutually exclusive: you can’t read closely, carefully, slowly if you are also doing theory, they say;
theorizing about literature is obstructed or distorted by reading, by attending to the idiosyncrasies of individual texts, they think. But this overlooks the fact of literature’s singularity, its strange mixing of the general and particular. As Bennett and Royle never tire of trying to make clear, close reading is necessarily bound up with questions of theory – and theory itself is always a question of reading. One of the things that we like to think makes our book unique is the fact that it is structured around a series of readings of literary texts. Rather than beginning with ‘isms’, with a set of general statements about a certain school or movement in criticism, we tend to work up close with a poem or story or novel and then try to explore the ‘theoretical’ implications of our reading. Because as soon as you begin to ask questions about a literary work (‘what does it mean?’, ‘what kind of text is it?’, ‘was the author male or female’, and so on), you are engaging with theory.

We think it might be helpful to end by summarizing what we are saying about reading in a number of brief bullet-pointed dicta (as if we were management consultants or advertising executives giving a powerpoint presentation). But in accordance with our commitment to reading, we will link these points to our account of Auden’s poem. The following points, then, are fundamental to ‘reading well’:

- **Paraphrase**, if you like: it can be helpful. But recognize that a paraphrase is not an end in itself. Saying that Auden’s poem is about suffering is just a beginning.

- **Attend** to the way that a text says something as well as *what* it is saying. Look, for example, at how the intricacies of the rhyme-scheme in Auden’s poem help to propound its meanings.

- **Think** about how the language and rhetorical effects reflect or enact, enhance or nuance a text’s meaning. Consider the fact that the plainness, the un-remarkableness of Auden’s language reflects his subject, the way that ordinary, everyday life just goes on, oblivious to extraordinary events.
Look for the ‘theoretical’ questions that your reading brings up and be ready to engage with those questions as fundamental to the text’s meaning and significance. Is Auden being ironic? What are his intentions here? What weight should we anyway give to authorial intention?

Be alert to the kinds of allusions, both verbal and generic, that the text involves. Is there, for example, an intertextual relationship between Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ and his ‘Funeral Blues’? In what ways does the poem engage with, revise, respond to the ‘ekphrastic’ tradition of poems on paintings? What is distinctive or singular about this poem’s painterly qualities?

Respond to the ways that a text is itself, in a self-reflexive way, attentive to the question of reading. In Auden’s poem, looking at pictures might be taken to be a form of ‘reading’ and the poem might be understood to be about what Frank Kermode, in a book of that name, calls ‘Forms of Attention’.

Consider how the text moves between the particular and the general. Auden’s poem is in part about the way that one generalizes from particular examples and how one can then get lost in the example.

Tease out the logic of the text and try above all to explore what is conflictual or paradoxical or ironic. Auden’s poem is about paying attention and not paying attention to amazing events, and is itself both amazing and very ordinary – giving the sense that the ordinary may itself be extraordinary, and may even be more interesting, in some ways, than what seems extraordinary.

Remember history: are there ways in which the text responds to the historical, cultural, social, economic as well as perhaps personal circumstances in which it was written and published? As we indicated earlier, critics have suggested that Auden’s poem should be read in contexts including the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Hitler in the 1930s.
• **Examine** details: get stuck on words, images, rhetorical figures, formal features such as rhyme and rhythm. What is the word ‘human’ doing in line three of Auden’s poem? What is its relationship to the dogs and to the torturer’s horse later on, and to the non-human ship which is nevertheless anthropomorphized by being given the human attribute of not noticing or stopping to help when it ‘sees’ Icarus fall to his death? What does the poem tell us about what it means to be ‘human’? Well, that might be the beginning of another reading of the poem. Perhaps we should start again....

**Literary Works Discussed**


**Other References**


