

THE LOVE OF READING

Virginia Woolf

At this late hour of the world's history, books are to be found in every room of the house—in the nursery, in the drawing room, in the dining room, in the kitchen. And in some houses they have collected so that they have to be accommodated with a room of their own. Novels, poems, histories, memoirs, valuable books in leather, cheap books in paper—one stops sometimes before them and asks in a transient amazement what is the pleasure I get, or the good I create, from passing my eyes up and down these innumerable lines of print?

Reading is a very complex art—the hastiest examination of our sensations as a reader will show us that much. And our duties as readers are many and various. But perhaps it may be said that our first duty to a book is that one should read it for the first time as if one were writing it. One should begin by sitting in the dock with the criminal, not by mounting the bench to sit among the Judges. One should be an accomplice with the writer in his act, whether good or bad, of creation. For each of these books, however it may differ in kind and quality, is an attempt to make something. And our first duty as readers is to try and understand what the writer is making from the first word with which he builds his first sentence to the last with which he ends his book. We must not impose our design upon him; we must not try to make him conform his will to ours. We must allow Defoe to be Defoe and Jane Austen to be Jane Austen as freely as we allow the tiger to have his fur and the tortoise to have his shell. And this is very difficult. For it is one of the qualities of greatness that it brings Heaven and earth and human nature into conformity with its own vision.

The great writers thus often require us to make heroic efforts in order to read them rightly. They bend us and break us. To go from Defoe to Jane Austen, from Hardy to Peacock, from Trollope to Meredith, from Richardson to Rudyard Kipling is to be wrenched and distorted, to be thrown violently this way and that. And so, too, with the lesser writers. Each is singular; each has a view, a temperament, an experience of his own which may conflict with ours but must be allowed to express itself fully if we are to do him justice. And the writers who have most to give us often do most violence to our prejudices, particularly if they are our own contemporaries, so that we have need of all our imagination and understanding if we are to get the utmost that they can give us.

But reading, as we have suggested, is a complex art. It does not merely consist in sympathizing and understanding. It consists, too, in criticizing and in judging. The reader must leave the dock and mount the bench. He must cease to be the friend; he must become the judge. And this second process, which we may call the process of after-reading, for it is often done without the book before us, yields an even more solid pleasure than that which we receive when we are actually turning the pages. During the actual reading new impressions are always cancelling or completing the old. Delight, anger, boredom, laughter succeed each other incessantly as we read. Judgment is suspended, for we cannot know what may come next. But now the book is completed. It has taken a definite shape. And the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in several different parts. It has a shape, it has a being. And this shape, this being, can be held in the mind and compared with the

shapes of other books and given its own size and smallness by comparison with theirs.

But if this process of judging and deciding is full of pleasure it is also full of difficulty. Not much help can be looked for from outside. Critics and criticism abound, but it does not help us greatly to read the views of another mind when our own is still hot from a book that we have just read. It is after one has made up one's own opinion that the opinions of others are most illuminating. It is when we can defend our own judgement that we get most from the judgement of the great critics—the Johnsons, the Drydens, and the Arnolds. To make up our own minds we can best help ourselves first by realizing the impression that the book has left as fully and sharply as possible, and then by comparing this impression with the impressions that we have formulated in the past. There they hang in the wardrobe of the mind—the shapes of the books we have read, like clothes that we have taken off and hung up to wait their season. Thus, if we have just read say *Clarissa Harlowe* for the first time we take it and let it show itself against the shape that remains in our minds after reading *Anna Karenina*. We place them side by side and at once the outlines of the two books are cut out against each other as the angle of a house (to change the figure) is cut out against the fullness of the harvest moon. We contrast Richardson's prominent qualities with Tolstoy's. We contrast his indirectness and verbosity with Tolstoy's brevity and directness. We ask ourselves why it is that each writer has chosen so different an angle of approach. We compare the emotion that we felt at different crises of their books. We speculate as to the difference between the eighteenth century in England and the nineteenth century in Russia—but there is no end to the questions that at once suggest themselves as we place the books together.

Thus by degrees, by asking questions and answering them, we find that we have decided that the book we have just read is of this kind or that, has this degree of merit or that, takes its station at this point or at that in the literature as a whole. And if we are good readers we thus judge not only the classics and the masterpieces of the dead, but we pay the living writers the compliment of comparing them as they should be compared with the pattern of the great books of the past.

Thus, then, when the moralists ask us what good we do by running our eyes over these many printed pages, we can reply that we are doing our part as readers to help masterpieces into the world. We are fulfilling our share of the creative task—we are stimulating, encouraging, rejecting, making our approval and disapproval felt; and are thus acting as a check and a spur upon the writer. That is one reason for reading books—we are helping to bring good books into the world and to make bad books impossible. But it is not the true reason. The true reason remains the inscrutable one—we get pleasure from reading. It is a complex pleasure and a difficult pleasure; it varies from age to age and from book to book. But that pleasure is enough. Indeed that pleasure is so great that one cannot doubt that without it the world would be a far different and a far inferior place from what it is. Reading has changed the world and continues to change it. When the day of judgement comes therefore and all secrets are laid bare, we shall not be surprised to learn that the reason why we have grown from apes to men, and left our caves and dropped our bows and arrows and sat round the fire and talked and given to the poor and helped the sick—the reason why we have made shelter and society out of the wastes of the desert and the tangle of the jungle is simply this—we have loved reading.