

## Reading in a Digital Age

Notes on why the novel and the Internet are opposites, and why the latter both undermines the former and makes it more necessary

By **Sven Birkerts**

The nature of transition, how change works its way through a system, how people acclimate to the new—all these questions. **So much of the change is driven by technologies that are elusive if not altogether invisible in their operation.** Signals, data, networks. New habits and reflexes. Watch older people as they try to retool; watch the ease with which kids who have nothing to unlearn go swimming forward. Study their movements, their aptitudes, their weaknesses. I wonder if any population in history has had a bigger gulf between its youngest and oldest members.

**I ask my students about their reading habits, and though I'm not surprised to find that few read newspapers or print magazines, many check in with online news sources, aggregate sites, incessantly. They are seldom away from their screens for long, but that's true of us, their parents, as well.**

But how do we start to measure **effects**—of this and everything else? The outer look of things stays much the same, which is to say that the outer look of things has not caught up with the often intangible transformations. Newspapers are still sold and delivered; bookstores still pile their sale tables high. It is easy for the critic to be accused of alarmism. And yet . . .

Information comes to seem like an environment. If anything “important” happens anywhere, we will be informed. The effect of this is to pull the world in close. Nothing penetrates, or punctures. The real, which used to be defined by sensory immediacy, is redefined.

FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF HINDSIGHT, that which came before so often looks quaint, at least with respect to technology. Indeed, we have a hard time imagining that the users weren't at some level aware of the absurdity of what they were doing. Movies bring this recognition to us fondly; they give us the evidence. The switchboard operators crisscrossing the wires into the right slots; Dad settling into his luxury automobile, all fins and chrome; Junior ringing the bell on his bike as he heads off on his paper route. The marvel is that all of them—all of us—concealed their embarrassment so well. The attitude of the present to the past . . . well, it depends on who is looking. The older you are, the more likely it is that your regard will be benign—indulgent, even nostalgic. Youth, by contrast, quickly gets derisive, preening itself on knowing better, oblivious to the fact that its toys will be found no less preposterous by the next wave of the young.

These notions came at me the other night while I was watching the opening scenes of Wim Wenders's 1987 film *Wings of Desire*, which has as its premise the active presence of angels in our midst. The scene that triggered me was set in a vast and spacious modern library. The camera swooped with angelic freedom, up the wide staircases, panning vertically to a kind of balcony outcrop where Bruno Ganz, one of Wenders's angels, stood looking down. Below him people moved like insects, studying shelves, removing books, negotiating this great archive of items.

Maybe it was the idea of angels that did it—the insertion of the timeless perspective into this moment of modern-day Berlin. I don't know, but in a flash I felt myself looking back in time from a distant and disengaged vantage. I was seeing it all as through the eyes of the future, and what I felt, before I could check myself, was a bemused pity: the gaze of a now on a then that does not yet know it is a then, which is unselfconsciously fulfilling itself.

SUDDENLY IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE a world in which many interactions formerly dependent on print on paper happen screen to screen. It's no stretch, no exercise in futurism. You can pretty much extrapolate from the habits and behaviors of kids in their teens and 20s, who navigate their lives with little or no recourse to paper. In class they sit with their laptops open on the table in front of them. I pretend they are taking course-related notes, but would not be surprised to find out they are writing to friends, working on papers for other courses, or just trolling their favorite sites while they listen. Whenever there is a question about anything—a date, a publication, the meaning of a word—they give me the answer before I've finished my sentence. From where they stand, Wenders's library users already have a sepia coloration. I know that **I present book information to them with a slight defensiveness**; I wrap my pronouncements in a preemptive irony. I could not bear to be earnest about the things that matter to me and find them received with that tolerant bemusement I spoke of, that leeway we extend to the beliefs and passions of our elders.

AOL SLOGAN: “We search the way you think.”

I JUST FINISHED READING an article in *Harper's* by Gary Greenberg (“A Mind of Its Own”) on the latest books on neuropsychology, the gist of which recognizes an emerging consensus in the field, and maybe, more frighteningly, in the culture at large: that there may not be such a thing as mind apart from brain function. As Eric Kandel, one of the writers discussed, puts it: “Mind is a set of operations carried out by the brain, much as walking is a set of operations carried out by the legs, except dramatically more complex.” It's easy to let the terms and comparisons slide abstractly past, to miss the full weight of implication. But Greenberg is enough of an old humanist to recognize when the great supporting trunk of his worldview is being crosscut just below where he is standing and to realize that everything he deems sacred is under threat. His recognition may not be so different from the one that underlay the emergence of Nietzsche's thought. But if Nietzsche found a place of rescue in man himself, his Superman transcending himself to occupy the void left by the loss—the murder—of God, there is no comparable default now.

Brain functioning cannot stand in for mind, once mind has been unmasked as that, unless we somehow grant that the nature of brain partakes of what we had allowed might be the nature of mind. Which seems

logically impossible, as the nature of mind allowed possibilities of connection and fulfillment beyond the strictly material, and the nature of brain is strictly material. It means that what we had imagined to be the *something more* of experience is created in-house by that three-pound bundle of neurons, and that it is not pointing to a larger definition of reality so much as to a capacity for narrative projection engendered by infinitely complex chemical reactions. No chance of a wizard behind the curtain. The wizard is us, our chemicals mingling.

“And if you still think God made us,” writes Greenberg, “there’s a neurochemical reason for that too.” He quotes writer David Linden, author of *The Accidental Mind: How Brain Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God* (!): “Our brains have become particularly adapted to creating coherent, gap-free stories. . . . This propensity for narrative creation is part of what predisposes us humans to religious thought.” Of course one can, must, ask whence narration itself. What in us requires story rather than the chaotic pullulation that might more accurately describe what is?

Greenberg also cites philosopher Karl Popper, his belief that the neuroscientific worldview will gradually displace what he calls the “mentalist” perspective:

With the progress of brain research, the language of the physiologists is likely to penetrate more and more into ordinary language, and to change our picture of the universe, including that of common sense. So we shall be talking less and less about experiences, perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, purposes and aims; and more and more about brain processes. . . . When this stage has been reached, mentalism will be stone dead, and the problem of mind and its relation to the body will have solved itself.

But it is not only developments in brain science that are creating this deep shift in the human outlook. This research advances hand in hand with the wholesale implementation and steady expansion of the externalized neural network: the digitizing of almost every sphere of human activity. Long past being a mere arriving technology, the digital is at this point ensconced as a paradigm, fully saturating our ordinary language. Who can doubt that even when we are not thinking, when we are merely functioning in our new world, we are premising that world very differently than did our parents or the many generations preceding them?

What is the place of the former world now, its still-familiar but also strangely sepia-tinged assumptions about the self acting in a larger and, in frightening and thrilling ways, inexplicable world?

LET ME GO BACK to that assertion by Linden: “Our brains have become particularly adapted to creating coherent, gap-free stories. . . . This propensity for narrative creation is part of what predisposes us humans to religious thought.” What a topic for surmising! I would almost go so far as to say that it is a mystery as great as the original creation—the what, how, and whither—the contemplation of how chemicals in combination create things we call narratives, and how these narratives elicit the extraordinary responses they do from chemicals in combination. The idea of “narrative creation” carries a great deal in its train. For narrative—story—is not the same thing as simple sequentiality. To say “I went here and then here and then did this and then did that” is not narrative, at least not in the sense that I’m sure Linden intends. No, narration is sequence that claims significance. Animals, for example, do not narrate, even though they are well aware of sequence and of the consequences of actions. “My master has

picked up my bowl and has gone with it into that room; he will return with my food.” This is a chain of events linked by a causal expectation, but it stops there. Human narratives are events and descriptions selected and arranged for meaning.

The question, as always, is one of origins. Did man invent narrative or, owing to whatever predispositions in his makeup, inherit it? Is coming into human consciousness also a coming into narrative—is it part of the nature of human consciousness to seek and create narrative, which is to say meaning? What would it mean then that chemicals in combination created meaning, or the idea of meaning, or the tools with which meaning is sought—created that by which their own structure and operation was theorized and questioned? If that were true, then “mere matter” would have to be defined as having as one of its possibilities that of regarding itself.

We assume that logical thought, syllogistic analytical reason, is the necessary, right thought—and we do so because this same thought leads us to think this way. No exit, it seems. Except that logical thought will allow that there may be other logics, though it cannot explicate them. Another quote from the *Harper’s* article, this from Greenberg: “As a neuroscientist will no doubt someday discover, metaphor is something that the brain does when complexity renders it incapable of thinking straight.”

Metaphor, the poet, imagination. The whole deeper part of the subject comes into view. What is, for me, behind this sputtering, is my longstanding conviction that imagination—not just the faculty, but what might be called the whole *party of the imagination*—is endangered, is shrinking faster than Balzac’s wild ass’s skin, which diminished every time its owner made a wish. Imagination, the one feature that connects us with the deeper sources and possibilities of being, thins out every time another digital prosthesis appears and puts another layer of sheathing between ourselves and the essential givens of our existence, making it just that much harder for us to grasp ourselves as part of an ancient continuum. Each time we get another false inkling of agency, another taste of pseudopower.

READING the *Atlantic* cover story by Nicholas Carr on the effect of Google (and online behavior in general), I find myself especially fixated on the idea that contemplative thought is endangered. This starts me wondering about the difference between contemplative and analytic thought. The former is intransitive and experiential in its nature, is for itself; the latter is transitive, is goal directed. According to the logic of transitive thought, information is a means, its increments mainly building blocks toward some synthesis or explanation. In that thought-world it’s clearly desirable to have a powerful machine that can gather and sort material in order to isolate the needed facts. But in the other, the contemplative thought-world—where reflection is itself the end, a means of testing and refining the relation to the world, a way of pursuing connection toward more affectively satisfying kinds of illumination, or *insight*—information is nothing without its contexts. I come to think that contemplation and analysis are not merely two kinds of thinking: they are opposed kinds of thinking. Then I realize that the Internet and the novel are opposites as well.

This idea of the novel is gaining on me: that it is not, except superficially, only a thing to be studied in English classes—that it is a field for thinking, a condensed time-world that is parallel (or adjacent) to ours. That its purpose is less to communicate themes or major recognitions and more to engage the mind, the sensibility, in a process that in its full realization bears upon our living as an ignition to inwardness, which has no larger end, which is the end itself. Enhancement. Deepening. Priming the engines of conjecture. In this way, and for this reason, the novel is the vital antidote to the mentality that the Internet promotes.

This makes an end run around the divisive opposition between “realist” and other modes of fiction (as per the critic James Wood), the point being not the nature of the representation but the quality and feel of the experience.

It would be most interesting, then, to take on a serious experiential-phenomenological “reading” of different kinds of novels—works from what are seen now as different camps.

MY REAL WORRY has less to do with the overthrow of human intelligence by Google-powered artificial intelligence and more with the rapid erosion of certain ways of thinking—their demotion, as it were. I mean reflection, a contextual understanding of information, imaginative projection. I mean, in my shorthand, intransitive thinking. Contemplation. Thinking for its own sake, non-instrumental, as opposed to transitive thinking, the kind that would depend on a machine-drive harvesting of facts toward some specified end. Ideally, of course, we have both, left brain and right brain in balance. But the evidence keeps coming in that not only are we hypertrophied on the left-brain side, but we are subscribing wholesale to technologies reinforcing that kind of thinking in every aspect of our lives. The digital paradigm. The Google article in *The Atlantic* was subtitled “What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,” ominous in its suggestion that brain function is being altered; that what we do is changing how we are by reconditioning our neural functioning.

For a long time we have had the idea that the novel is a form that can be studied and explicated, which of course it can be. From this has arisen the dogmatic assumption that the novel is a statement, a meaning-bearing device. Which has, in turn, allowed it to be considered a minor enterprise—for these kinds of meanings, fine for high-school essays on Man’s Inhumanity to Man, cannot compete in the marketplace

with the empirical requirements of living in the world.

This message-driven way of looking at the novel allows for the emergence of evaluative grids, the aesthetic distinctions that then create arguments between, say, proponents of realism and proponents of formal experimentation, where one way or the other is seen as better able to bring the reader a weight of content. In this way, at least, the novel has been made to serve the transitive, goal-driven ideology.

But we have been ignoring the deeper nature of fiction. That it is inwardly experiential, intransitive, a mode of contemplation, its purpose being to create for the author and reader a terrain, an arena of liberation, where mind can be different, where mind and imagination can freely combine, where memory and sensation can be deployed, intensified through the specific constraints that any imagined situation allows.

THE QUESTION comes up for me insistently: Where am I when I am reading a novel? I am “in” the novel, of course, to the degree that it involves me. I may be absorbed, but I am never without some awareness of the world around me—where I am sitting, what else might be going on in the house. Sometimes I think—and this might be true of writing as well—that it is misleading to think of myself as hovering between two places: the conjured and the empirically real. That it is closer to the truth to say that I occupy a third state, one which somehow amalgamates two awarenesses, not unlike that short-lived liminal place I inhabit when I am not yet fully awake, when I am sentient but still riding on the momentum of my sleep. I experience both, at times, as a privileged kind of profundity, an enhancement.

READING A NOVEL involves a double transposition—a major cognitive switch and then a more specific adaptation. The first is the inward plunge, giving in to the “Let there be another kind of world” premise. No novel can be entered without taking this step. The second involves agreeing to the givens of the work, accepting that this is New York circa 2004 as seen through the eyes of a first-person “I” or a presiding narrator.

Here I have to emphasize the distinction, so often ignored, between the fictional creation “New York” and the existing city. The novel may invoke a place, but it is not simply reporting on the real. The novelist must bring that location, however closely it maps to the real, into the virtual gravitational space of the work. Which is a fabrication.

THE VITAL THING is this shift, which cannot take place, really, without the willingness or intent on the reader’s part to experience a change of mental state. We all know the sensation of duress that comes when we try to read or immerse ourselves in anything when there is no desire. At these times the only thing possible is to proceed mechanically with taking in the words, hoping that they will somehow effect the magic, jump-start the imagination. This is the power of words. They are part of our own sense-making process, and when their designations and connotations are intensified by rhythmic musicality, a receptivity can be created.

The problem we face in a culture saturated with vivid competing stimuli is that the first part of the transaction will be foreclosed by an inability to focus—the first step requires at least that the language be able to reach the reader, that the word sounds and rhythms come alive in the auditory imagination. But

where the attention span is keyed to a different level and other kinds of stimulus, it may be that the original connection can't be made. Or if made, made weakly. Or will prove incapable of being sustained. **Imagination must be quickened and then it must be sustained—it must survive interruption and deflection.** Formerly, I think, the natural progression of the work, the ongoing development and complication of the situation, if achieved skillfully, would be enough. But more and more comes the complaint, even from practiced readers, that **it is hard to maintain attentive focus.** The works have presumably not changed. What has changed is either the conditions of reading or something in the cognitive reflexes of the reader. Or both.

All of us now occupy an information space blazing with signals. We have had to evolve coping strategies. Not merely the ability to heed simultaneous cues from different directions, cues of different kinds, but also—this is important—to engage those cues more obliquely. **When there is too much information, we graze it lightly,** applying focus only where it is most needed. We stare at a computer screen with its layered windows and orient ourselves with a necessarily fractured attention. It is not at all surprising that when we step away and try to apply ourselves to the unfragmented text of a book we have trouble. It is not so easy to suspend the adaptation.

WHEN READING Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, I am less caught in the action—there is not that much of it—than the tonality. I have the familiar, necessary sense of being privy to the thoughts (and rhythmic inner workings) of Hans, the narrator, and I am interested in him. Though to be accurate I don't know that it's as much Hans himself that I am drawn to as the feeling of eavesdropping on another consciousness. All aspects of this compel me, his thoughts and observations, the unexpected detours his memories provide, his efforts to engage in his own feeling-life. I am flickeringly aware as I read that he is being *written*, and sometimes there is a swerve into literary self-consciousness. But this doesn't disturb me, doesn't break the fourth wall: I am perfectly content to see these shifts as the product of the author's own efforts, which suggests that I tend to view the author as on a continuum with his characters, their extension. It is the proximity to and belief in the other consciousness that matters, more than its source or location. Sometimes everything else seems a contrivance that makes this one connection possible. It is what I have always mainly read *for*.

This brings me back to the old question, the one I have yet to answer convincingly. **What am I doing when I am reading a novel?** How do I justify the activity as something more than a way to pass the time? Have all the novels I've read in my life really given me any **bankable instruction**, beyond a deeper feel for words, the possibilities of syntax, and so on? Have I ever seriously been bettered, or even instructed, by my exposure to a theme, some truism about existence over and above the situational proxy-experience? More, that is, than what my own thinking has given me? And how would this work?

**I read novels in order to indulge in a concentrated and directed sort of inner activity that is not available in most of my daily transactions.** This reading, more than anything else I do, parallels—and thereby tunes up, accentuates—my own inner life, which is ever associative, a shuttling between observation, memory, reflection, emotional recognition, and so forth. A good novel puts all these elements into play in its own unique fashion.

WHAT IS THE POINT, the value, of this proxy investment? While I am reading a novel, one that reaches me at a certain level, **then the work, the whole of it—pitch, tonality, regard of the world—lives inside me** as if inside parentheses, and it acts on me, maybe in a way analogous to how materials in parenthesis act **on the sense of the rest of the sentence.** My way of looking at others or my regard for the larger directional meaning of my life is subject to pressure or infiltration. I watch people crossing the street at an intersection and something of the character's or author's sense of scale—how he inflects the importance of the daily observation—influences my feeling as I wait at the light. And the incidental thoughts that I derive from that watching have a way of resonating with the outlook of the book. Is this a widening or deepening of my experience? Does it in any way make me better fit for living? Hard to say.

**What does the novel leave us after it has concluded, resolved its tensions, given us its particular exercise?** I always liked Ortega y Gasset's epigram that "culture is what remains after we've forgotten everything we've read." We shouldn't let the epigrammatical neatness obscure the deeper truth: **that there is something over and above the so-called contents of a work that is not only of some value, but that may constitute culture itself.**

HAVING JUST THE OTHER DAY FINISHED *Netherland*, I can testify about the residue a novel leaves, not in terms of culture so much as specific personal resonance. Effects and impacts change constantly, and there's no telling what, if anything, I will find myself preserving a year from now. But even now, with the scenes and characters still available to ready recall, I can see how certain things start to fade and others leave their mark. The process of this tells on me as a reader, no question. With O'Neill's novel—and for me this is almost always true with fiction—the **details of plot fall away first, and so rapidly that in a few months' time I will only have the most general précis left. I will find myself getting nervous in party conversations if the book is mentioned, my sensible worry being that if I can't remember what happened in a novel, how it ended, can I say in good conscience that I have read it?** Indeed, if I invoke plot memory as my stricture, then I have to confess that I've read almost nothing at all, never mind these decades of turning pages.

What—I ask it again—**what has been the point of my reading?** One way for me to try to answer is to ask what I *do* retain. Honest answer? A distinct **tonal memory**, a conviction of having been inside an author's

own language world, and along with that some hard-to-pinpoint understanding of his or her psyche. Certainly I believe I have gained something important, though to hold that conviction I have to argue that memory access cannot be the sole criterion of impact; that there are other ways that we might possess information, impressions, and even understanding. For **I will insist that my reading has done a great deal for me even if I cannot account for most of it.** Also, there are different kinds of memory access. You can shine the interrogation lamp in my face and ask me to describe Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* and I will fail miserably, even though I have listed it as one of the novels I most admire. But I know that traces of its intelligence are in me, that I can, depending on the prompt, call up scenes from that novel in bright, unexpected flashes: it has not vanished completely. And possibly something similar explains Ortega's "culture is what remains" aphorism.

In a lifetime of reading, which maps closely to a lifetime of forgetting, we store impressions willy-nilly, according to private systems of distribution, keeping factual information on one plane; acquired psychological insight (how humans act when jealous, what romantic compulsion feels like) on another; ideas on a third, and so on. I believe that **I know a great deal without knowing what I know.** And that, further, insights from one source join with those from another. I may be, unbeknownst to myself, quite a student of human nature based on my reading. But I no longer know in every case that my insights are from reading. The source may fade as the sensation remains.

But there is one detail from *Netherland* that did leave an especially bright mark on me and may prove to be an index to everything else. O'Neill describes how Hans, in his lonely separation from his wife and child (he is in New York, they are in London), makes use of the Google satellite function on his computer. "Starting with a hybrid map of the United States," he tells,

I moved the navigation box across the north Atlantic and began my fall from the stratosphere: successively, into a brown and greenish Europe. . . . From the central maze of mustard roads I followed the river southwest into Putney, zoomed in between the Lower and Upper Richmond Roads, and, with the image purely photographic, descended finally on Landford Road. It was always a clear and beautiful day—and wintry, if I correctly recall, with the trees pale brown and the shadows long. From my balloonist's vantage point, aloft at a few hundred meters, the scene was depthless. My son's dormer was visible, and the blue inflated pool and the red BMW; but there was no way to see more, or deeper. I was stuck.

At the very end of the novel, Hans reverses vantage. That is, he pursues the satellite view from England—he has returned—looking to see if he can see the cricket field where he worked on Staten Island with his friend Chuck Ramkissoon:

I fall again, as low as I can. There's Chuck's field. It is brown—the grass has burned—but it is still there. There's no trace of a batting square. The equipment shed is gone. I'm just seeing a field. I stare at it for a while. I am contending with a variety of reactions, and consequently, with a single brush on the touch pad I flee upward into the atmosphere and at once have in my sights the physical planet, submarine wrinkles and all—have the option, if so moved, to go anywhere.

I find this obsession of his intensely moving, a deep reflection of his personality; I also find it quite

effective as an image device. To begin with, the contemplation of such intensified action-at-a-distance fascinates—the idea that one even *can* do such a thing. And I confess that I stopped reading after the first passage and went right upstairs to my laptop to see if it was indeed possible to get such access. It is—though I stopped short of downloading what I needed out of fear that bringing the potentiality of a God vantage into my little machine might overwhelm its circuitry.

This idea of vantage is to be considered. Not only for what it gives the average user: sophisticated visual access to the whole planet (I find it hard to even fathom this—I who after years of flying still thrill like a child when the plane descends in zoom-lens increments, turning a toy city by degrees into an increasingly material reality), but also for the uncanny way in which it offers a correlative to the novelist's swooping freedom. Still, Hans can only get so close—he is constrained by the limits of technology, and, necessarily, by visual exteriority. The novelist can complete the action, moving right in through the dormer window, and then, if he has set it up thus, into the minds of any of the characters he has found/created there.

This image is relevant in another, more conceptual way. The reality O'Neill has so compellingly described, that of swooping access, is part of the futurama that is our present. The satellite capability stands for many other kinds of capabilities, for the whole new reach of information technology, which more than any transformation in recent decades has changed how we live and—in ways we can't possibly measure—who we are. It questions the place of fiction, literature, art in general, in our time. Against such potency, one might ask, how can beauty—how can the self's expressions—hold a plea? The very action that the author renders so finely poses an indirect threat to his livelihood. *No, no—comes the objection. Isn't the whole point that he has taken it over with his imagination, on behalf of the imagination?* Yes, of course, and it is a striking seizure. But we should not be too complacent about the novelist's superior reach. For these very things—all of the operations and abilities that we now claim—are encroaching on every flank. **Yes, O'Neill can capture in beautiful sentences the sensation of a satellite eye homing in on its target, but the fact that such a power is available to the average user leaches from the overall power of the novel-as-genre. In giving us yet another instrument of access,** the satellite eye reduces by some factor the operating power of imagination itself. The person who can make a transatlantic swoop will, in part for having that power, be less able, or less willing, or both, to read the labored sequences that comprise any written work of art. Not just his satellite ventures, but the sum of his Internet interactions, which are other aspects of our completely transformed information culture.

AFTER ALL MY JIBES against the decontextualizing power of the search engine, it is to Google I go this morning, hoping to track down the source of Nabokov's phrase "aesthetic bliss." And indeed, five or six entries locate the quote from his afterword to *Lolita*: **"For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss."** The phrase has been in my mind in the last few days, following my reading of *Netherland* and my attempts to account for the value of that particular kind of reading experience. "Aesthetic bliss" is one kind of answer—the effects on me of certain prose styles, like Nabokov's own, or John Banville's, or Virginia Woolf's. But the phrase sounds trivial; it sounds like mere connoisseurship, a self-congratulatory mandarin business. It's far more complicated than any mere swooning over pretty words and phrases. **Aesthetic bliss. To me it expresses the delight that comes when the materials, the words, are working at their highest pitch, bringing sensation to life in the mind.**

Sensation . . . I can imagine an objection, a voice telling me that sensation itself is trivial, not as important as *idea*, as theme. As if there is a hierarchy with ideas on one level, and psychological insights, and far below the re-creation of the textures of experience and inward process. I obviously don't agree, nor does my reading sensibility, which, as I've confessed already, does not go seeking after themes and usually forgets them soon after taking them in. What thou lovest well remains—and for me it is language in this condition of alert, sensuous precision, language that does not forget the world of nouns. I'm thinking that one part of this project will need to be a close reading of and reflection upon certain passages that are for me certifiably great. I have to find occasion to ask—and examine closely—what happens when a string of words gets something exactly right.

WE ALWAYS HEAR arguments about how the original time-passing function of the triple-decker novel has been rendered obsolete by competing media. **What we hear less is the idea that the novel serves and embodies a certain interior pace,** and that *this* has been shouted down (but not eliminated) by the transformations of modern life. **Reading requires a synchronization of one's reflective rhythms to those of the work.** It is one thing to speed-read a dialogue-rich contemporary satire, another to engage with the nuanced thought-world of Norman Rush's characters in *Mating*. **The reader adjusts to the author,** not vice versa, and sometimes that adjustment feels too difficult. The triple-decker was, I'm theorizing, synchronous with the basic heart rate of its readers, and is now no longer so.

But the issue is more complicated still. For it's one thing to say that sensibility is timed to certain rhythms—faster, slower—another to reflect that what had once been a singular entity is now subject to near-constant fragmentation by the turbulent dynamic of life as we live it. Concentration can be had, but for most of us it is only by setting oneself *against* the things that routinely destroy it.

**Serious literary work has levels.** The engaged reader takes in not only the narrative premise and the craft of its realization, but also the resonance—**that which the author creates, deliberately, through her use of language.** It is the secondary power of good writing, often the ulterior motive of the writing. The two levels operate on a lag, with the resonance accumulating behind the sense, building a linguistic density that is the verbal equivalent of an aftertaste, or the “finish.” **The reader who reads without directed concentration, who skims, or even just steps hurriedly across the surface, is missing much of the real point of the work; he is gobbling his foie gras.**

Concentration is no longer a given; it has to be strategized, fought for. But when it is achieved it can yield experiences that are more rewarding for being singular and hard-won. To achieve deep focus nowadays is also to have struck a blow against the dissipation of self; it is to have strengthened one's essential position.

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