

SLOW READING: the affirmation of authorial intent¹

by Lancelot R. Fletcher

The phrase, "slow reading," is taken from Nietzsche. In paragraph 5 of the preface to Daybreak (Morgenröthe) he writes:

A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both, I just as much as my book, are friends of lento. It is not for nothing that I have been a philologist, perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, A TEACHER OF SLOW READING:- in the end I also write slowly. Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste - a malicious taste, perhaps? - no longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is 'in a hurry'. For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow - it is a goldsmith's art and connoisseurship of the WORD which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it lento. But precisely for this reason it is more necessary than ever today, by precisely this means does it entice and enchant us the most, in the midst of an age of 'work', that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to 'get everything done' at once, including every old or new book:- this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches 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...My patient friends, this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists: LEARN to read me well!²

"I AM A TEACHER OF SLOW READING." So says Nietzsche. When I started my teaching career (in the 1960s) I tried saying the same thing in the first class of every course I taught: "Good morning," I would say. "My name is Lancelot Fletcher. I am a teacher of slow reading," at which point all the students would laugh. Why? Because they thought they already knew how to read slowly. In those days in the US many people used to pay considerable sums of money to teachers who promised to teach them "speed reading." Students and businessmen alike were desperate to improve their reading speed because they had too much written material to read and not enough time to read it all at their normal reading speed – which they all felt was much too slow for their purposes. So the idea of taking a course from a teacher of slow reading struck them as utterly ridiculous. As far as they were concerned reading slowly was a problem, a sign of their inadequacy in the field of reading. Why would they want to study how to walk (slowly) when what they needed to do was to run – as fast as possible?

After the laughter subsided I would tell my students that what I meant by saying this was: "This is the nature of philosophy. For me philosophy IS the teaching of slow reading." This didn't help very much, but it was strange enough so the students didn't laugh and some of them began to pay attention. In one class the cleverest student said, "Ok, I will accept that, even though I don't know what you mean. I'm ready. So let's begin slow reading."

And I answered, "But that's just the problem. You can't begin." "What do you mean?" he asked, beginning to sound rather exasperated. "If you can't begin slow reading, how can anybody learn it, and how can you honestly say that you teach slow reading?"

"The problem is you are thinking that to begin slow reading means to pick up a text and read it in a certain way, different from how you have been reading before, but that's not the way it works.

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² Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak, 1881, translation by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.5.

Slow reading doesn't start with reading. When slow reading begins, you are already reading. You have been reading for a long time. Slow reading starts, not with reading but with slowing. But even that is not quite right. It would be more accurate to say that slow reading starts with stopping, with turning around. In our reading habits we are like drivers who have been speeding down the highway, intent on reaching our destination, when we begin to notice that things along the side of the road don't look quite the way we expected. At some point we begin to think that we might have misinterpreted a road sign that we passed a few kilometers back, and then suddenly the thought strikes us that we have been driving rapidly in the wrong direction! Now, as you turn your car around and start driving back to take another look at that sign, now you may find yourself in the slow reading frame of mind."

If one could begin slow reading the first lesson would be: Just be present to the words on the page. Allow the words to simply BE there, and take note of the fact that they ARE there – BEFORE YOU DECIDE WHAT THEY MEAN.

If you are like most of my students you will again feel tempted to find this ridiculous and dismiss it with a wave of your hand. "Does this guy think he is some kind of Zen master? What does he mean by telling me that I should learn to 'Allow the words to simply be there?' I mean, the words are what they are! They can be what they are without any permission from me, so I don't need to allow them to be there, and I certainly don't need to learn how to do this!"

And, of course, for the students who respond in this way, which is to say most students, this is a very hard lesson, because it asks them to do something that they are completely unaccustomed to doing, and even the request they experience as an insult. If you doubt this, make the following test: Read a sentence of eight or ten words to a group of students – or to any group of people you choose -- and ask them to reproduce the sentence word for word. What happens? Do they repeat the words that you spoke? In my experience that almost never happens. Instead almost everybody responds by telling you what they thought the sentence meant – but in different words.

Why does this happen? I think it is because we are utterly preoccupied with deciding what the sentences we read and hear MEAN to us. Even more than that, we are preoccupied with deciding whether WE agree or disagree with what we take the sentences to mean, whether WE approve or disapprove. And, because we are so preoccupied, we generally do not pause to take note of what the sentences we read actually SAY. This rush to interpretation and judgment is strongly encouraged by most of our educational practices.

Perhaps we need to consider how we originally began to read. Nowadays most of us have learned to suppress vocalization as we read. We are taught that it is bad form to read aloud unless we are intending to share what we are reading with someone else who is willing to listen. And some of us can even read without moving our lips. But I am willing to bet that, for each one of us, when we first learned how to read, reading meant reading aloud -- that is, speaking, reproducing, the words exactly as they are on the page. In your first moments of reading, when you were just learning to read, being a reader meant that you were an actor. To read you had to speak; you had to become the voice of the author. So that is where we begin.

The intention of the teaching of slow reading (which, as I said, is what I understand philosophy to be) is to subvert the customary mode of reading. Its intention is to afford students (i.e. those who make us the gift of their listening) some critical access to their own interpretive activity. The purpose is not to leave students with the notion that the text means whatever they wish to make it mean. That is pretty much the customary mode of reading that the teaching of slow reading wishes to subvert. These days students will do that pretty well on their own without any teaching from us. But to subvert this mode of reading we do first need to make students aware of what they are doing, aware of the fact that they are in the habit of imposing their own meanings on the text.

But some people might say that that is the only thing we can do. What alternative is there to imposing our own meanings or interpretations on the text? To answer that question it is useful to step out away from the literary context for a moment and think about an ordinary conversation. As an example let me relate a conversation I recall from my childhood, when I was about fourteen. My best friend had a younger sister named Fay who was about seven at the time of this conversation. Fay had the misfortune to be blind, but she was also a musical prodigy and had perfect pitch. One day I was visiting my friend and her sister was playing the piano as she often did when suddenly Fay stopped playing music and started simply banging her fists on the keyboard, making horrible, loud crashing sounds. Then she screamed, "This piano is so out of tune I can't play it anymore!" To which her mother responded, "Fay, what's the matter? Are you hungry, do you want me to fix you some food?" And Fay then screamed even louder, "NO! I don't want any food, I just want you to get the piano tuned!"

What happened in this little domestic drama? Fay's mother, being the sort of mother who lived in the kitchen and tended to understand many things in terms of food, brought her "kitchen listening" to her daughter's exclamation and, being full of motherly concern for her daughter's wellbeing she responded to her daughter's cry for help with an offer of the kind of help she was most capable of providing. To that extent Fay's mother was like one of our usual modern (or postmodern) students in imposing her own meaning on her daughter's "text". Fortunately, Fay's mother then did something that our students rarely do: she asked the "author" if her interpretation was correct, and the author emphatically set her straight.

To say it once more, the teaching of slow reading is intended to give students some critical access to their own interpretive activity – their own habit of manufacturing meanings. However, this is not the end of slow reading. It is only the beginning. For the discovery of our own interpretive habits is the necessary precondition for gaining access to authorial intent. In ordinary life we become aware of and sometimes correct our interpretations of the speeches we listen to by having conversations with the authors of those speeches. The purpose of the teaching of slow reading is to allow us to enter into conversations with the authors of great works -- those authors whose distinction is that they afford us the opportunity to think things that are worthy of thought.

But how can you enter into a conversation with an author who is dead or otherwise not available? I will offer a suggestion in a moment, but first let me pose a question: Do the principles of interpretation critically depend on whether or not the author is available to answer your questions? If you are reading a book by a living author to whom you could presumably send email and then, when you are half way through the book you learn that the author has suddenly died, does this fact cause you to suddenly change your way of interpreting the book? Do you say, "Oh, good! He is

dead so now I can make his words mean whatever I want because he is not around to tell me that I am wrong?"

Now let me say how I approach this issue in my own teaching. When I am beginning to teach a course on one of the important texts in philosophy, say Plato's Republic, after saying that I am a teacher of slow reading I say, "As you read this book, I want you to assume that it was written by God." This often causes a certain amount of consternation and incipient revolt (more in the US than in Georgia). Most of the students suddenly feel that I am trying to dominate and control their minds. They ask, "You mean we have to accept what this guy says, even if we don't agree? Even if we think he is wrong?"

"Not at all," I reply. "The purpose of asking you to assume that the text for the course is written by God is to give you the opportunity to learn."

"How so?"

"Well, if you are going to learn, and you are going to learn from the author of this text, then I suppose there must be something you have to learn from that author. Right?"

"I suppose so."

"And what you have to learn from the author, in this case Plato, must then be something about which you know less than Plato. It might even be something about which you have incorrect opinions or assumptions. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"Now, when you read a passage in a book and you find the passage unclear or inconsistent with what you already think, do you immediately say to yourself, 'Here is an opportunity for me to learn?'"

"Well, not always."

"Not at all,' would be more like it! What most of us do is to say, 'That guy was confused. He is just making fallacious arguments.' Of course, in the abstract, especially when we are being polite, we say we 'know' that knowledge is supremely desirable. Somebody who took us seriously might suppose, therefore, that when the opportunity to acquire knowledge and get rid of some portion of our ignorance presented itself we would immediately jump at it, as if it were some particularly delicious food which we have long craved. But, in fact, that is not what usually happens, is it? In most cases, when the opportunity to learn is seen close up it looks distinctly unattractive. It is bad news. The reason it is bad news is that the opportunity to learn is always accompanied by the realization that we have hitherto been ignorant and mistaken. Naturally enough, we tend to avoid such discomfort by seeking to shift the blame. 'It's not my fault!' we cry, 'It's the author who is mistaken.' That, then, points us to the purpose of assuming that the author of our text is God, i.e. a being whose intention may be obscure, but who does not make mistakes. If we adopt the working hypothesis that the author of our text is God, and if we act on that hypothesis when we come to

something that appears strange, confusing or wrong, attributing this to errors or ignorance of the author is not an available strategy, so we are driven to look first at the possibility that the confusion reflects our own ignorance."

And then a student will say, "But what if the author really IS mistaken? I mean, we can pretend that Plato's dialogues were written by God, but we all know that that isn't really so, and besides I don't even believe in the existence of God. So, by accepting your hypothesis, don't we run the risk of deceiving ourselves and never finding out the truth?"

I answer, "Did I ask you to believe anything? To accept anything in the text as true? Not at all. I am not asking you to believe anything the author says. I am asking you to try to think what the author thinks. We are concerned with what we should do when a passage in the text occurs for us as questionable, and I am suggesting that, by supposing the author to be God, the perplexity that occurs for us in the text becomes an occasion for self-examination, an occasion for the discovery of our own ignorance. Yes, I suppose that, at the end of the day, after we have finished our slow reading, I might have to agree that the author of the text was probably a human being capable of making mistakes, not a god. But if we start out operating on the assumption that the text was written by God, by the time we reach the point where we need to consider the author's mistakes, we will have reached a thorough understanding of the questions which the author meant to ask. If we refuse to assume the author's divinity even provisionally, we may never get so far. And perhaps that -- the knowledge of the questions -- is the real object of philosophical inquiry."

In some parts of the academic world the idea of authorial intent has become an object of contempt. We are sometimes told that, since the meaning of the author cannot be known with certainty (especially in the case of dead authors) we should interpret texts based on our own ideas, without even considering what the author meant. The absurdity of such a practice becomes very clear as soon as you imagine it in the context of ordinary conversation: A person says something, say X. You respond by saying, "That means ...Y." The first speaker responds, "No, that's not what I meant at all." And you say, "I don't care what you have to say now. I know that what you meant was Y, and that's the end of it." In short, the denial of respect for authorial intent entails a contempt for authors which ends by sanctioning in students a contempt for speakers that ultimately leads to a complete breakdown of effective communication.

The teaching of slow reading, therefore, is an experiment that aims beyond itself. In itself the practice of slow reading intends to create occasions for joining in conversations with (not just about) some of the most powerful thinkers who have ever lived -- not merely to learn what they thought, but to think with them and learn from them. But the aim of slow reading beyond itself is to consider whether the practice of slow reading might foster the recovery of a certain art of conversation: that in which listening holds at least an equal place with speaking.

The practice of slow reading avoids debates about the status of authorial intent in hermeneutic theory. Instead, the practice of slow reading aims at a practical demonstration of the power of respect for authorial intent and, through that, a demonstration of the power of respect for authors, whether they are alive or dead, whether their authorship is expressed in writing or in speaking. The practice of slow reading explores the possibility that a respectful reading of books that are thoughtfully written, whatever their age, is an exceptionally powerful means for generating new

ideas relevant to the issues of the present day. And we hope to find that reading with respect for the intent of the authors of our study texts also tends to generate conversations in which we are attentive and respectful toward one another.