

## Reading and Wonder

You recall that a few weeks ago, Mr. Hungerford talked to you about, among other things, awe and wonder. Rosh Hashanah: Days of Awe. That talk is where I stole the Heschel quotation for the readings, to help remind you of what Tom said to you. I hope you recall at least a little of what he said, because today I'd like to build off what he said by talking to you about reading and that sense of wonder. Have you ever seen those sort of tacky posters in public libraries with the slogan, "Reading is Fundamental!," emphasis on "Fun!" with a capital F-U-N, and an inspirational picture of Brad Pitt or Oprah Winfrey holding a book and looking simply thrilled. Well, I'm trying to urge you to think of reading not so much as "fun, F-U-N", but as literally wonderful – full of wonder. Reading is WONDER-mental.

The first thing that needs to be clarified is what I mean by reading, since after all, that verb covers many different sorts of acts. Reading seems to me to exist on a continuum, the two extremes of which are marked by attention on one side and distraction on the other. One can read and yet be very distracted, as for instance the way one reads a traffic sign while en route to, say, the most recent Twilight movie – yes, on that fateful day in November, your eyes will register the words sufficiently for you to recognize and respond appropriately to "STOP", but the majority of your attention will in truth be focused on whether Robert Pattinson as Edward will or will not look even hotter than in the first movie. So, the way you will read that STOP sign on November 20th? That's minimal reading with a maximum of distraction. The polar opposite of such reading is the way I know each and every one of you read all of your assigned books for your English classes – attentive to every word and detail of imagery, attuned to the nuances of rhythm and form, effortfully stretching yourself to register and weigh every possible semantic significance. [That IS the way you all read for your classes, isn't it?] Of course most of your reading will fall somewhere in between these two poles – a detective novel takes more attention than a greeting card, while an Austen novel demands more attention than the detective novel, though less in turn than say James Joyce's Ulysses. Well, but maybe not – perhaps you feel the Austen novel rewards your attention with truths about the world and our judgments of each other and that Joyce's work does not, so you find yourself paying very careful attention to the nuances of Austen's social satire while your eyes in contrast merely pass prettily over Joyce's lovely,

lyrical writing. [Though I have to warn you, if that's the way you try to read Ulysses for Shamus this term, that course probably won't turn out so well for you.] Because if one thing is clear, it is that the amount of attention we give to a piece of reading is at least in part up to us. The attentive reader of a poem and the distracted or disengaged reader of that same poem will have such different reading experiences that they might be considered to be reading two different poems. Perhaps you yourself have already had the experience of being both readers, that is, of reading something attentively that you once read lazily and finding yourself amazed that words that once washed incomprehensively over you somehow now connect to the very centers of your being.

On the other hand, the amount that we can be rewarded by reading something is at least in part a product of the words offered. Reading "STOP" signs, though providing you crucial information for preserving your own life and others, can not matter to who you are as a person, despite the care with which you attend to the word. Because traffic signs use language informatively, they aim at the sparsest, most immediately understandable use of language possible – the last thing a traffic sign wants you as a reader to do is to pause to analyze its nuances; even to ask "STOP when?," for instance, would be to misunderstand a STOP sign rather than to be on the way to arriving at a deeper understanding of it. In contrast, language used in its fullest way, such as the way works of literature do, can reward our attention because it presents itself expressively and thus as a mystery rather than as a message. And I mean "mystery" not in the detective novel sense of the word now, because a mystery that can be solved unequivocally is a puzzle, not a mystery proper, and for that reason not unlike other time-passers such as crossword puzzles. No, I mean "mystery" more in the sense of the largest truths about the world, ourselves, and each other, the sorts of truths which we can only ever glimpse partially and which we can never fully understand. Though solving puzzles challenges our abilities and thus gives us intellectual satisfaction, whether those puzzles be acrostics or the best means of organizing one's closet after buying too many pairs of Enzo shoes over break, puzzles can not yield revelation in the way that mysteries can. Genuine mysteries are not solved; they remain sources of wonder to us, and are thus inexhaustibly rich, always repaying our further reflection on them.

Thus I would argue that there is a deep relation between the mystery of the world as glimpsed through silent contemplation, the type of wonder about the world Heschel had in mind, and the type of wonder that reading opens to us. Because the existence of any one thing in the world – that lark in the tree, that mug on the table – is already mysterious to us, we have found ways to record our confrontation with that mystery, most of which we term "art." By drawing

that mug, by writing a poem about that lark, we engage in a type of attention that opens us to the world around us through our focus on this one particular aspect of the world. The first thing we note about this act of attention is that, unlike the attention we pay to a crossword puzzle, there is no natural endpoint to it. In that sense a drawing is never finished – you might do the best you can do and then call it quits, but you have never succeeded in attaining that ideal endpoint of perfect capture you set out to achieve. We cannot unravel nor even do justice to the mystery of the lark, no matter how long we look at it, how carefully we listen to it, how faithfully we render its bright feathers in watercolors or its darting movements in words. That’s why it’s a mystery. So why isn’t the attention we pay to it merely frustrating then? Why bother attending to the lark at all? What rewards our attention in this case? What is it that the poet Walt Whitman means when he writes a line such as, “A morning glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books”? What exactly is satisfying?

Well, in one way it is satisfying simply to admit to one’s self that there are things that cannot be understood, that must be celebrated and loved for what they are rather than puzzled out. But in another way too, it seems that we focus on trying to see one aspect of the world aright in order to remind ourselves that the largest mystery – that the world *is*, and is so wondrous – must remain insoluble. Our attunement to that mystery, precisely because it is beyond our understanding, gives rise to the best impulses within us. “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars,” Whitman wrote, exhorting us to celebrate the perfection of even the tiniest aspects of nature – “the running blackberry” for instance “would adorn the parlors of heaven.” But why paint that blackberry? Why write a poem about those leaves of grass? Isn’t that falsifying or corrupting the perfect silence of contemplation that should mark such celebration? Not necessarily. Poet Mary Oliver tells us that, though a poem cannot aspire to the existence of the things it records, the writing and the reading of poetry can nonetheless help us to remain open and attentive to the world around us: she writes, “The poem is not the world./ It isn’t even the first page of the world./ But the poem wants to flower, like a flower./ It knows that much./ It wants to open itself,/ like the door of a little temple,/ so that you might step inside and be cooled and refreshed,/ and less yourself than part of everything.” This shedding of individuality, this becoming part of everything, seems a strange return for the act of attending so carefully to individual things in the world, but this type of celebratory contemplation has often been seen as leading to a form of enlightenment greater than mere knowledge precisely because it allows one to take off those habitual blinders of self that force one to see the world as comprising separable selves and things. In Hermann Hesse’s novel

Siddhartha, the young Buddha finds greatest enlightenment only when he ceases trying to learn from his own individual experience and instead listens attentively to the sound of a river. Only then does he discover the unity of being, of which he too is a part, and in discovering that unity through the river also discovers that he could have learned the same lesson from any one aspect of nature if he had attended carefully enough to it. In describing his own teacher, Siddhartha says, “I do not attach great importance to thoughts. I attach more importance to things. For instance, there was a man at this ferry who was my predecessor and teacher. He was a holy man who for many years believed only in the river and nothing else. He noticed that the river’s voice spoke to him. He learned from it; it educated and taught him. The river seemed like a god to him and for many years he did not know that every wind, every cloud, every bird, every beetle is equally divine and knows and can teach just as well as the esteemed river. But when this holy man went off into the woods, he knew everything; he knew more than you and I, without teachers, without books, just because he believed in the river.” And this is a great theme of contemplative works and of art – that the mystery that any one aspect of the world reveals is the whole world; by carefully attending to the one, we attend without knowing it to all, because each aspect opens into the whole.

So, why have I spent all this time on the mystery that unfolds through silent contemplation when I want to discuss the mystery of language? The more attentive of you will have noticed how many of these passages I just quoted actually seem to work against my stated topic by seeming to **prefer** silence and nature to language: Hesse’s celebration of things over words, even Whitman’s preference of morning glories to metaphysics – these passages seem to indicate a hierarchy of mystery and of revelation in which silence has it all over language in enhancing our sense of wonder. Here, I’ll read one more such passage from Whitman, just to nail the lid shut on my argument’s coffin: “Oxen that rattle the yoke and chain or halt in the leafy shade./ what is that you express in your eyes?/ It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life.” See? “More than”, not “equal to” – forget even a picture is worth a thousand words; here, one attentive gaze at a cow promises more wisdom than could be revealed through innumerable words or seemingly any use of language imaginable. On this view, you should forget about reading altogether, and go hang out by the side of a river or a cow.

Well, recall first that Whitman was the same poet who had such great things to say about language in some of our readings for today [consult your program if you’ve forgotten what those things were]; recall too that “Song of Myself”, the first poem in Leaves of Grass and the one from which all of these Whitman passages are taken, is itself a poem, and that therefore there is

at least something a bit contradictory about *writing* about the value of cow gazes. Mostly though I want you to recall Mary Oliver's passage about poems opening like flowers, because I want to use that passage to suggest that language can itself be as mysterious as a thing in the world, and in just the same ways. So I want to argue against the preference of cow gazes to the printed word, because I want to say that any such hierarchy misses an essential point about language: though it might seem that the meanings of words are easy nuts to crack compared to the meaning of, well, real nuts, because words are used by humans, all you need do is read one good poem – Leaves of Grass, say – to remind yourselves that there is more of mystery than of message in any use of language we think of as rich or expressive. Thus, there is a very good reason to think of language as capacious enough to accommodate mystery, for every single human being is at least as mysterious as a cow. In fact, though it might seem that language, as a common property of a people, deciphers and unravels the mystery of ourselves by forcing us to make ourselves available through common words to each other, very little reflection will prompt you to realize that words can at best give glimpses of the different worlds we each represent to each other. We might use the same words, but we use them in such vastly different ways that we might as well be considered as speaking our own languages. Even with a simple, single word such as “red,” I think you'll all quickly see that your meaning of red no doubt differs greatly from that of the person you're sitting next to, not just because the physiology of your eyes differs, but because she might think first of the red of that favorite red sweater she wore that summer she was eight, while you channel the word always through, say, your tendency to faint at the sight of blood or your repugnance for valentine's day hearts. The more you think about our different experiences and our correspondingly different associations for any one word we use, the more astonishing it begins to seem that we can use the same words at all. But we can – language accommodates enormous ranges of meanings and still functions perfectly well – or, pretty well. Problems in understanding each other occur all the time, but luckily we can always keep talking to straighten them out.

And if somewhat complex puzzles are already raised by a friend's asking you, “Do you have a red sweater I can borrow?” [-- “what sort of red do you need?”], imagine the mysteries that begin to be glimpsed when she is trying to talk to you not about sweaters but about her feelings about God or her own inchoate belief that telling a lie is a fundamental wrong against the universe. Having souls, we are infinite, and therefore we are necessarily mysterious to each other; as the unique possessor of my soul, no word sums me, no set of phrases can sound my depths. “I am untranslatable,” writes Whitman, in another section of “Song of Myself.” Even

when I try in my most creative and comprehensive way to say just what I mean, the words I choose are at best tokens, providing glimpses. When I use language most richly, I invent the meanings of words as I speak them; say for instance a friend confides to you, “I don’t like the feeling of those Twilight books – it’s all too red, somehow.” You of course have never heard ‘red’ used in that way before, but you try to sight yourself along her use of the word, try to glimpse what she means when she uses it that way; and the mysterious thing about language is that it can still work, it can and does stretch itself to say new things all the time. Language is as familiar and as mysterious as the mysterious beings you rub shoulders with every day.

This privacy of language is not just an unfortunate fact about human experience. Indeed, it is importantly true that we need to consider each other and every book we read as in principle speaking a different language. The first word of our ethical relation to each other is uttered only when we listen to each other’s words as if they were remarks from a language we do not as yet speak but must come to know. Do you see what I’m saying? Morality demands that we respect each other as potential mysteries; it reminds us that we never know the person to whom we speak well enough to judge him or her. What it asks of us, therefore, is the infinite responsiveness in and through language that can only occur when language is understood as mysterious rather than as always already saying just exactly what we previously thought. If, not getting it at all, you breezily say, “Oh yes, those Twilight books are WAY too red,” you haven’t extended yourself at all; you haven’t learned anything new from your friend’s interesting utterance, because you haven’t paid attention to what might have been uniquely meant. Not only have you lost a chance to learn something by not paying attention, but you have failed to speak to your friend, to challenge your own familiar sense of red with her creative and new sense, to really converse therefore. And note that the word “converse” is not that far removed etymologically from “convert” and “conversion”, to change completely. Conversing – conversation – is at its highest a transformative process, and the best way for two souls to mix and meet and in that meeting be transformed from what they were to something new and unknown.

Now it’s in this way precisely that I see reading as mattering to us. When we read, we do not simply receive messages from some author, nor do we as readers merely impose meanings – no, we engage in a conversation with the language of the text; we attend carefully to the words because we have to, because literature uses language in its fullest, most innovative ways. Each poem, each novel is a world, authored to be sure by a human rather than a god but no less infinite or mysterious for all that. We therefore read best when we read as if each word use could be saying something entirely unexpected and new to us. Though not all books reward us in these

ways, for certainly many books are written to be amusing distractions rather than richly uttered worlds, yet in the best books and in most poems (outside of Hallmark cards) language well and richly used rewards our attention, revealing fuller glimpses of the underlying landscape with renewed efforts and repeated readings. You have probably already in your own lives discovered how the best books you read, the books that matter to you most, continue to converse with you even years after you last closed the cover on your most recent reading of it.

For me, the best example of this never-ending conversation you can have with a work of literature is with a novel I'm truly excited to be teaching and reading again this term – Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim. Lord Jim is not necessarily the very best novel I've ever read – as many of you know, Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov has my vote for that – but it is one of the best, and, more importantly, it's the one that I feel myself continuing to read in nearly everything I do. I first read Lord Jim when I was a freshman at Swarthmore, and then – because it was the book I ended up writing my first serious philosophical essay about – I read it 5 or 6 times over during the summer of my sophomore year. Since then, I've probably read it at least 12 more times. You'd think by now I'd have it down cold, wouldn't you? But the truth is, the more I read that novel, the more sure I am that I *do not* understand all that it means to say about the nature of morality and of our responsibilities to each other. How can I know that I do not know? Philosophically, this is actually a difficult question to answer.

The best that I can say now is that it's in the nature of the mystery of a richly coherent language use that I can *feel* that the novel's truths exceed even my most comprehensive, my fullest interpretation. I can *feel* that I lack the words to speak the full sense that Lord Jim makes – but for that same reason I can also feel when a new word is gained that helps me to converse with that novel better. It continues to reward my attention, even when I think I'm paying none at the moment, by continuing to transform me all these years later. That novel gauges my ability to speak the words, to forge the language, that would best express its mystery. In fact, everything I've told you, this entire chapel talk, has been about nothing else than the things I believe I've learned from Lord Jim about language and moral responsibility and responsiveness and the need to pay attention to the mystery that people and books allow you to glimpse. Reading is wonderful. Thus I will close by hoping for all of you at least one book in your lives that seems full of mystery to you, that reads you as fully and ever more fully as you read it, that – in the words of Melville's Ishmael describing the great voyage he is about to embark on -- swings open for you “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world.” But remember: that ship is always embarking, that journey is always there before you, the ticket for your passage is placed in your hand

everyday, if you can sail forth on the words of literature with your sense of wonder intact, open and alert for the voyage to begin.