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The Dark Side of Literacy: Literature and Learning How Not to Read, by the Germanist Benjamin Bennett, is, as its title suggests, an attack upon a certain conception of reading. The book means to provoke, and its thesis is that reading, defined as a process in time by which the reader enters into the realm of an alternative experience, feeds into totalitarian politics. And high literature—as distinct from reading in general—is accordingly politically corrupt to the extent that it promotes such a conception of reading. To support his position Bennett offers two strands of interpretations, first an extended investigation of Dante, Boccaccio, Cervantes, and the Faust myth (including original sources, Marlowe, Goethe and Thomas Mann), where Bennett proposes a possible genealogy of this idea of the reading process, and second an exploration of works by Goethe, Hauptmann, Hofmannsthal, Mann, Kleist and Kafka, in which instances of a critique of such an idea of reading reveal themselves.

Bennett's thesis is comparable in ways to arguments against "escapist" reading, the mode of reading in which the page-turner allegedly turns off the mind, or at least tunes its activity down to a lower, more passive level. Bennett's point is that a great deal of both literature and literary theory since the development of print culture has had a dimension that absorbs the individual, a dimension for which Bennett offers the term "The Reader," who is the primary actor in this netherworld of the "dark side of literacy." The Reader is a generalized, anonymous reader that each individual, unless she is careful, will in effect be absorbed by the text, which in turn has a univocal meaning. As Bennett himself puts it:

First, I become The Reader [sic] only by participating directly in the realization of the book's content, a realization that takes place in the very process of reading, which is transformed into something that feels... very much like immediate experience.... Second, The Reader must be at some level The Same Reader in everyone, or at least in everyone who reads (says Poulet) as he or she "ought." (85-86)

With its thesis *The Dark Side of Literacy* has much that is admirable, compelling and provocative in it. One of its primary insights is that many modern theorists espouse a definition of reading that does not hold under scrutiny. While many people tend to think that reading is a process where, with our eyes moving across the printed words on a page, we enter into an alternative state, experiencing a reality entirely different from our own, Bennett (following Stanley Corngold) contends that we cannot actually say what happens in the process of reading. This idea of reading as entering into another state achieves preponderance above all because of

how novel reading tends to play out, and qualifies as a kind of “reading for kicks,” as Bennett chooses to term it. Such “reading for kicks,” whose exemplary theorists are Henry James, George Poulet and Wolfgang Iser, is distinct from the positions of “reading for art” (represented for Bennett by Longinus) and “reading for wisdom” (represented by Harold Bloom). The treatment of James, Poulet and Iser at times seems one-sided, as too driven by polemic, and I was not convinced that their positions could be so easily dismissed as “reading for kicks.” But these are minor problems and do not detract from the overall direction of the book’s argument.

After an initial exposition of the thesis, the first section of the book, “Theory,” proceeds to examine a few examples in which “modern reading” makes itself apparent—Goethe’s “Auf dem See,” Keat’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and key differences between Winckelmann’s and Schlegel’s theorizing the possibility of mythology (in the manner of the ancient Greeks) in the modern age. Crucial for Bennett is the question of audience. If you have a limited audience, with members who might actually know each other or share a common body of local knowledge, then the problem of The Reader—the generalized, anonymous reader—does not arise. But as soon as the audience is unlimited, as soon as the reader can, at least in theory, be anyone, then a type of homogenization becomes one of the dangers of reading.

“History,” the book’s second section, presents a possible genealogy of The Reader. The Reader, while best exemplified by a kind of “absorption” into the “experience” of a novel, acquires an incipient existence in Dante, and then develops in Boccaccio, Cervantes and the different incarnations of the Faust story. Of the *Commedia* Bennett suggests that the relation between Dante and his readership is of a peculiar kind of proximity, where the *io* of Dante can also be understood as the *io* of the reader, and where accordingly the text is in part made by the reader’s experience of it. In another major phase of the development of modern, process-oriented reading, the figure of Don Quixote in turn becomes a kind of prediction of what the anonymous, generalized “Reader” will look like. In the sections on the Faust story, Bennett’s genealogy focuses primarily on Marlowe’s play and then, jumping over a number of centuries, Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*, where Bennett underscores a number of inner contradictions in Zeitblom’s account of Leverkühn’s story. One intriguing aspect here of the interpretation here is the difference between music and text (which also plays a role in the interpretation of Keat’s poem), where commonplace assumptions about the temporality of listening to, understanding and reading music (the difference, say, between “hearing” and “having heard”) are put into question.

In the third and final section of the book, “Response,” Bennett devotes his energies to a series of texts in the German novella tradition: Hauptmann’s “Bahnwärter Thiel,” Hoffmannthal’s “Reitergeschichte,” Mann’s “Der Tod in Venedig,” and numerous texts by both Kleist and Kafka. All of these texts critique, in various ways, the idea of the anonymous, generalized reader. In “Bahnwärter Thiel,” for example, Bennett argues that, once we recognize a certain figuration of the reader

(riding in the train, looking out the windows at the character Thiel), the text effectively reveals itself as a trap for that reader, where the reader has to confront an image of the anonymous entity that he or she has become. In a number of texts by both Kleist and Kafka the idea of the body, considered from a particular angle, brings the question of interpretation to a kind of breaking point. “To read this story,” says Bennett of “Die Marquise von O...,” “is to unlearn how to read, or to learn how to read without reading.”

The Dark Side of Literacy, however, has a number of unsatisfying points, one of the most important of which is the dearth of contextualization with other thinkers and literary critics. Bennett is making an argument similar to that of others, and a well-known one that immediately comes to mind is that of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* regarding the culture industry, whereby capitalist companies produce a cultural entertain goods—popular books, film, television shows, and music—to be easily consumed, with the effect that a type of uniformity and political blindness is cultivated in the broader population. The substance of Bennett’s argument differs considerably, but its general thrust is similar. This reader would have like to see Bennett engage with like-minded thinkers more, as opposed to relying on exclusively on the theory of The Reader, which seems to me not quite as innovative as he thinks it is. Similarly, the type of reading experience Bennett critiques has analogous—and more powerful—forms in film and television, and while Bennett is making an argument about literary history, it would strengthen his argument to explore the parallels in other media in greater depth. There are likewise times when he mentions how critics such as Ian Watt, Bakhtin, Percy Lubbock and Doris Cohn, are implicated in the type of theorizing Bennett is critiquing, but he does not care to substantiate the statement with a brief description or a quotation. One can guess what he is getting at, but a more in-depth engagement would have been in order.

Finally, some readers will take issue with the central rhetorical tool of the study, Bennett’s key figure: the “reader.” This tool, not surprisingly, causes some rhetorical awkwardness, since nowadays “reading” can also mean “interpretation,” and Bennett would have done well to acknowledge as much. It is also central to Bennett’s notion of The Reader that meaning is univocal, since all readers, under this definition, are the same. But the idea that meaning is a product of individual encounters with texts a commonplace in advanced literary theory nowadays, and Bennett should have expressed, in more explicit terms, how his innovation adds to the idea of the multiplicity of literary meaning, for otherwise one might be left wondering how the approach of *The Dark Side of Literacy* is truly so original in the end.

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