Essay on the Notion of Reading[1]

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Translated by Chris Fleming

Abstract: In this essay, Simone Weil undertakes a meditation on the idea of "reading," which she thinks can shed new light on a diverse range of conceptual and experiential "mysteries," especially with respect to our existential responses to the world. A central concern is how we ascribe meaning and respond to phenomena. She argues that, for the most part, our reading of the world and the things in it are immediate, not subject to "interpretation," at least as this is regularly conceived. Further, Weil says, our readings of the world are invariably tied to particular kinds of valuation, of ethical assessment and orientation, which appear to us as both obvious and immediate. This immediacy of reading, however, does not entail that our readings cannot be changed or challenged—only that such a change or challenge requires a particular kind of labor.

This is an attempt to define a notion that has not yet received an adequate name, and to which the name "reading" might be considered appropriate. There is a mystery in reading, a mystery whose contemplation may doubtless not help to explain, but to understand other mysteries in the lives of men.

We all know that sensation is immediate, brutal, and takes us by surprise. A man unexpectedly receives a punch in his stomach; everything is changed for him even before he knows what has happened. I touch a burning object; I feel startled before I know I am burning myself. Something

1. Translator's Note: Originally published as "Essai sur la Notion de Lecture," *Les Études Philosophiques* 1, no. 1 (1946), 13–19.

seizes me. This is how the universe treats me and it is through this treatment that I recognise it. One is not surprised by the power that blows, burns, or sudden noises have to seize us; for we know—or believe we know—that these all come from outside us, from matter, and that the mind has no part in it, except as much as that is what suffers. The thoughts we form impose emotions upon us, but do not take hold of us in the same way.

The mystery is that sensations, which in themselves are almost indifferent, seize us in the same way through their meaning. A few black lines on white paper—this is very different from a punch in the stomach. But sometimes the effect is the same. Everyone has more or less felt the effect of bad news that one reads in a letter or a newspaper; one feels taken hold of, knocked over, as if by a blow, before realizing what it is all about; and even later the very sight of the letter remains painful. Sometimes, when time has dulled the pain a little, if among the papers we are handling suddenly the letter appears, a more acute pain surfaces, as sudden and as piercing as a physical pain, hitting us as if it came at us from outside of us, as if fire belonged [*résidait*] to this piece of paper just as burning belongs to fire. Two women each receive a letter, telling each of them that her son is dead; the first, after glancing at the paper, faints—and never again, until the time of her death, will her eyes, her mouth, her movements, be as they once were. The second remains the same; her expression, her attitude do not change; she is incapable of reading. It is not the sensation but rather the meaning that has seized the first woman, reaching her mind immediately, brutally, without her participation, in the same way that sensations seize us. It is as if the pain inhabited the letter itself and then sprung up into the face of the one who read it. As for the sensations themselves, such as the colour of paper or ink, they do not even appear. What is given to sight is the pain itself.

It is in this way that, at every moment of our life, we are seized as from outside ourselves by the meanings we read in appearances. We can, as a result, debate endlessly about the reality of the external world. Because what we call the world are those meanings that we read: the world is not real. But it grabs us as if it were external to us; and so the world is real. Why do we desire to resolve this contradiction, when the highest task of thought on this earth is to identify and contemplate those insoluble contradictions, which, as Plato said, draw us upwards? What is unique is that we are not given sensations and meanings; we are given only what we read; we do not see the letters. Studies of testimony, in particular, have shown this clearly. Proofreading is difficult because in reading we usually see the letters that the typographers have inadvertently omitted as much as those they have

put in; it is necessary to force oneself to read another meaning, not that of words or sentences, but that of the letters of the alphabet, without forgetting the first. As for not reading at all, it is impossible; we cannot look at a text printed in a language we know, placed properly, and read nothing; at most, perhaps, one could achieve this by practicing it for a very long time.

The stick of the blind man, an example introduced by Descartes, provides an image analogous to that of reading. Everyone can convince themselves by handling a pen that their sense of touch is somehow transported to the nib. If the pen encounters some unevenness in the paper, this deviation is immediately given, and yet the sensations in our fingers, in our hand, through which we read this, do not even appear. Yet this resistance in the pen is only something we read. The sky, the sea, the sun, the stars, human beings, everything around us is likewise only something we read. What we call a corrected sensory illusion is a modified reading. If in the evening, on a deserted road, instead of a tree I think I see a man waiting to ambush me, a threatening human presence forces itself on me, and, as in the case of the letter, makes me shudder even before I know what is going on; I approach, and suddenly everything is different; I do not shudder, I read a tree and not a man. There is no appearance and interpretation; a human presence had penetrated through my eyes to my soul, and now, suddenly, it is the presence of a tree. If I hate someone, there is not him on one side and my hatred on the other; when he advances towards me, it is something hateful which advances towards me; moreover, the perversity of his soul is more evident to me than the colour of his hair. Besides, if he is blond, it is a hateful blonde; if he is brown, it is a hateful brown. Esther, advancing towards Ahasuerus, does not advance towards a man whom she knows can put her to death; she advances towards majesty itself, terror itself, which by her sight reaches her soul, and that is why the effort to walk makes her faint. She says it herself; what she contemplates with fear is not Ahasuerus' forehead, but the majesty which is imprinted upon it which she reads. In such cases, we generally speak of an effect of the imagination; but perhaps it is better to use the word reading. This word implies that effects are produced by appearances, but appearances which do not themselves appear, or hardly appear; what appears is something else that is to appearance what a sentence is to letters; but it arises as an appearance, suddenly, brutally, coming from the external world, and, by force of evidence, almost irrefutable.

If I see a book bound in black, I do not doubt that there is something black there, except in order to philosophise. If I see at the top of a newspaper "June 14," I have no doubt that what appears there is "June 14." If someone

whom I hate, whom I fear, whom I despise, whom I love, approaches me, I have no doubt that I have something before me which is odious, dangerous, contemptible, loveable. If someone, looking at the same newspaper in the same place, told me seriously, several times, that he reads not June 14th, but June 15th, it would disturb me; I would not understand. If someone does not hate, does not fear, does not despise, does not love as I do, it also troubles me. How? He sees these people—or, if they are far away, the indirect manifestations of their existence—and he does not read odiousness, dangerousness, despicability, lovability? It is not possible; he is speaking in bad faith; he is lying; he is insane. It is incorrect to say that we believe that we are in danger because we are afraid. On the contrary, one is afraid by virtue of the presence of danger; it is the danger that scares us; but danger is something I read. Sounds, visible appearances, are by themselves not dangerous; they possess the same relation to danger as do the paper and lines of ink in a threatening letter. But as in the case of a threatening letter, this danger that I read takes hold of me from the outside and scares me. If I hear an explosion, the fear lies in the noise and comes to take possession of my soul by my hearing it, about which I can refuse to be afraid no more than I can to refuse to hear. It is the same for the rattling sound of a machine-gun, if I am familiar with this noise; it is not the same if I am not acquainted with it. It is not, however, something analogous to a conditioned reflex; it is something analogous to reading, where sometimes a combination of new signs, which I had never seen before, grabs my soul, where the injurious meaning penetrates me as irresistibly as do the white and black.

Thus the meanings—which, considered abstractly, look like simple thoughts—arise and surround me, take hold of my soul and change it from moment to moment, so that, to use a familiar English phrase, I cannot call my soul my own.[2] I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act based on what I read, how could I act otherwise? If I read the prospect of winning honour in a certain noise, I run towards this noise; if I read danger and nothing else, I run away from this noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting in this way, even if I feel reluctance, imposes itself on me in an obvious and immediate manner, like the noise itself, and along with it; I read this necessity in the noise. Likewise, if in civil unrest or war, unarmed men are sometimes killed, it is because what is vile in these people and that asks to be annihilated [*ce qui'il y a de vile n ces êtres et qui demande à être anéanti*] enters into the souls of armed men at the same time as the

2. T/N: Even though Weil uses a "familiar English phrase," she translates it into French in her original work.

sight of those people's clothes, their hair, their faces; just as when they are looked at and in one colour they read their hair and in another their flesh, with identical obviousness they also read in these colours the need to kill. If in the normal course of life there are few crimes, it is because we read in the colours that enter through our eyes when a human being is in front of us something that must to a certain degree be respected. There is between these two states the same difference as between those of the walker on the deserted road, when he reads in an appearance first a man lying in wait, and then a tree. His first response is entirely a response to a human presence; the idea that there could be some question as to whether there is a man is an abstract, insubstantial idea that comes from him, not from the outside, and one that has no existential purchase. Then it happens in a flash, and suddenly, without transition, he is entirely alone, surrounded only by things and plants; the idea that a man could have been where he now perceives the tree has itself become insubstantial. Similarly, in times of peace, the idea of causing the death of a human being, if it comes from within, is not read in the appearances; on the contrary, we read in the appearances the prohibition of doing this. But during a civil war, in relation to a certain category of human beings, it is the idea of sparing a life which is insubstantial, which comes from within us, which is not read in appearances; it appears in the mind, but does not transform itself into action. From one state to another there is no transition possible; the change happens in a flash; each of the two readings, when they are there, appears as the only real, the only possible option, and the other seems purely imaginary. These are extreme examples; but our whole life is cut from this fabric, from meanings which successively impose themselves, and each of which, when it appears and enters into us through the senses, reduces all ideas that might oppose it to the status of phantoms.

I have a certain power over the world, which allows me to change appearances, but indirectly, through work, not by mere wishing. I put a piece of white paper on this black book, and I do not see black anymore. This power is limited by the limits of my physical strength. I may also have the power to change the meanings I read in appearances and which impose themselves on me; but this power is also limited, indirect, and exercised through work. Work in the ordinary sense of the term is an example of this because every tool is a blind man's stick, an instrument for reading, and every apprenticeship is a learning-to-read in a particular way. The apprenticeship finished, meanings appear to me at the nib of my pen or a sentence appears in printed letters. For the sailor, the experienced captain, whose boat has in a sense

become an extension of his body, the boat is an instrument for reading the storm, and he reads it quite differently to the passenger. Where the passenger reads chaos, unlimited danger, fear, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, means to escape the storm, an obligation to act with courage and honour.

Action carried out either on oneself or on others consists in transforming meanings. A man, a head of state, declares war, and new meanings spring up around each of forty million men. The art of being an army chief is to bring the enemy soldiers to read flight in appearances, so that the idea of standing ground loses all substance, all efficacy; he can achieve this, for example, by strategizing, by surprise, by the use of new weapons. War, politics, rhetoric, art, teaching, every action directed towards others is essentially about changing what men read.[3]

Whether one is concerned with oneself or others, two problems arise, that of technique and that of value. Texts of which whose appearances constitute the characters seize my soul, abandon it, are replaced by others; is one better than any other? Are there ones truer than others? Where to find a criterion to judge this? To think of a true text that I do not read, which I have never read, is to think of a reader of this true text, that is to say, God; but immediately there appears a contradiction, for I cannot apply to the being that I conceive of when I speak of God this notion of reading. Besides, even if I could, it would not allow me to order the texts that I read according to a hierarchy of value.

Put this way, maybe the problem may be worthy of reflection. For thus posited it presents together all possible problems of value insofar as they are concrete. A man tempted to steal something entrusted to him will not abstain from it simply because he has read the *Critique of Practical Reason*; he will restrain himself, perhaps, it will seem to him, in spite of himself, if the very appearance of the object entrusted to him seems to cry out to him that it must be returned. Everyone has experienced similar things, where it seems that one would wish to act badly, but cannot. Other times, we would like to act rightly, but cannot. The question is whether anyone who, looking at the thing entrusted to him, reads this way, does so better than someone who reads in such an appearance all the desires that could be satisfied by keeping it. The question is whether searching for a criterion that makes it possible for one to decide which technique allows one to move from one

3. T/N: Weil's gender-specific language here has been retained for clarity. Attempts to introduce neuter terms like "one" or "an individual" risk introducing conceptual confusions into the text.

reading to another, is a more concrete problem than inquiring into whether it is better to keep or return something. On the other hand, the problem of value which surrounds this notion of wisdom relates to the true and the beautiful as well as the good, without it being possible to separate them. Perhaps in this way their connection, which is a mystery, might be illuminated somewhat. We do not know how to think them together, and they cannot be thought about separately.