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Lost in a Book

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Cecile M. Jagodzinski. *Privacy and Print: Reading and Writing in Seventeenth-Century England.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999. Pp. xii + 218.

One of the most powerful and moving moments in nineteenth-century fiction is the scene at the beginning of *Jane Eyre* in which a young girl has slipped into a concealed window seat to read a book. "Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the dreary November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast." She is a lonely child, mistreated and misunderstood by her adoptive family, to which she does not really belong. Reading her book in this hidden space, she finds not "escapism" but intimations of another, truer world, such as her own might yet be and should be beyond the cramping circumstances which–had she not encountered the secret world conveyed to her by books–are all that she has ever known or could know. Although (until it is interrupted by the abominable fourteen-year-old John Reed) this scene lacks the elements that ordinarily make drama and excitement in fiction–a strong hero, important affairs of state in the balance, action, suspense, movement, colorful scenery, interaction of characters–it is all the more powerful for its drab simplicity. For at least two readers are present to share the experience: the child Jane Eyre and the silent reader of Charlotte Bronte's book–not

to mention the hovering presence of Bronte herself, whom we imagine as a girl living in her father's Rectory on the Yorkshire moors. As these participants watch the wind and rain gusting outside the window pane, their psychological experiences converge and the book becomes more real than the world in which (as a postmodernist theorist would say) a book is only a material object.

Such is–or can be–the extraordinary process of reading learned in childhood, while a reader's mind and sense of identity are still being formed, as found in western cultures at any time from roughly the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Those who have been drawn into the profession of English literature may (or may not) recognize the experience and its formative significance more readily than others. Before printing came into common use during the seventeenth century such an experience–reading a book alone in private and thus somehow finding oneself and forming an identity as well as gaining particular knowledge–was not widely available. And it may be, as Alvin Kernan speculates in *The Death of Literature*, that such an intimate encounter is no longer possible for those whose chief acquaintance in childhood with vivid worlds beyond their own comes not through reading books but through the wholly different experience of watching television–or more recently through engagement with computers and the internet. To those growing up in this latter world, books might well seem only "material objects" or "commercial products." At best they would seem to belong in the same category as other cultural flotsam, disconnected and unreal, like the scenes of a sitcom or in a shop window. At worst they would seem to be political enticements, emanating from the controlling establishment, motivating the more cautiously enlightened consumer-recipient to deconstruction, lest they seize control of his thoughts and bend them to a distant purpose.

Cecile Jagodzinski does not indulge in such autobiographical revelation in her excellent study, *Privacy and Print*, yet from the indirect evidence of her book as a whole one may speculate that television and mass culture did not succeed in corrupting her experience of reading, as they appear to have done for so many other literary critics, self-identified as "postmodern." She is still plainly someone who can

trust a book as a potential friend, feels and enjoys it, lives in it, as well as stands back and analyzes it. Without the primary gift of self-immersion and immediate enjoyment, a critic's secondary ability to stand back, deconstruct, and analyze a book or poem is worth very little.

Jagodzinski begins with the idea, which she rightly characterizes as both "commonplace" and "much disputed," that seventeenth-century England was the locus of new attitudes concerning privacy, individuality, and subjectivity, one might say of modernity itself. As a possible cause or enabler of this birth in England of modern individualism, she proposes "that the emergence of the concept of privacy as a personal right, as the very core of individuality, is connected in a complex fashion with the history of reading" (1). To support her thesis Jagodzinski draws on a variety of texts: devotional, autobiographical, epistolary, feminist, and pornographic. In her first chapter, on "Reading and the . . . Private Spirit," she focuses on the significance for disempowered and persecuted individuals of devotional texts, when political circumstances dictate that these books must be read privately, sometimes secretly, and must often substitute for the role ordinarily taken by the institutional Church and its ministers, by casual and unimpeded association with fellow parishioners, and by public forms of liturgy and worship, whether Catholic Mass or Puritan sermon.

Catholics were among the first in England to be forced into a newly enforced privacy in religion, which was made possible by the invention of printing and the widespread distribution of devotional literature, but which was also driven by the political circumstances of religious persecution in England. Nonconformist Puritans also suffered from an inability to worship freely and publicly, and Anglicans too–although more briefly–eventually experienced persecution and enforced privacy during twenty years of exclusion from power under the Interregnum governments. The case for Anglicans has been made by Malcolm Ross in *Poetry and Dogma*, with respect to the Eucharist. One result of these tyrannous pressures was a flourishing of devotional guides for lay people, which were not without precedent from less disruptive times such as the fourteenth century but which now assumed new significance because of the circumstances under which they appeared. The

earliest of these private devotional guides were mostly Catholic, as Louis Martz noticed in *The Poetry of Meditation*; but by the end of the seventeenth century almost all religious persuasions had turned to private devotional reading, often first driven by persecution but later led by choice.

Like the best recent British historians, Jagodzinski drops the traditional Whig myth or "Black Legend," which assumes that Catholic persecution of Protestants was tyrannous but that Protestant persecution of Catholics was liberating. As Stephen Innes says in a quotation printed on the dust jacket, "The author gets us beyond the tired Protestant/Catholic dichotomy while still preserving the core of an English exceptionalist framework." Which is to say that something extraordinary happened in England during this period to transform Western culture and eventually world culture, as Marxists have often argued. If so, we would do well to put aside pious preconceptions and come to grips with what actually happened.

I personally find this first chapter on the significance of private devotional reading to be by far the most interesting and persuasive, perhaps because there is plenty of historical and literary evidence that exceptional cultural transformations happen under severe social and psychological pressure, pressure such as would have been exerted upon people by the political enforcement of religious change. Some of the apparent causes of introversion and subjectivity are exile, banishment, exclusion from social intercourse, alienation, and frustration of natural desires. Jagodzinsky's second chapter, on "Authoring the Private Self" through conversion narratives, is somewhat less successful, because the treatment of the individual works is too brief to do justice to the complexities involved. Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* needs at least a chapter to itself. Henry Jessy's *Exceeding Riches of Grace*, which recounts the conversion of Sarah Wright, raised in this reader's mind unresolved problems when Sarah seemingly reverts to her old ways after her brother's death.

Two other conversion narratives are even more problematic. What, for example, could have been Bishop Gilbert Burnet's purpose in recounting the story of a young Jewish woman's conversion to Chris-

tianity, when her conversion leads her into what would have been judged immoral behavior culminating in an abortion? Presumably Burnet means to show that Christianity is superior to Judaism, but that lesson does not emerge from his book as Jagodzinsky describes it. Even more problematic is *An Account of the Seducing of Ann, the Daughter of Edward Ketelbey, of Ludlow, Gent. To the Popish Religion*, which ends with Ann, the stubborn daughter, under house imprisonment by her parents, still refusing to knuckle under or (if one prefers) see the light. As Jagodzinsky notes, the older meaning of the word "private" was mostly negative: secret, underhanded, anti-social, possibly treasonous. That older view would judge Ann's behavior as wickedly rebellious and conspiratorial and would condemn her priestly seducers. Surely the author of an anti-Catholic tract would not wish his readers to entertain the more modern idea that we should admire Ann for asserting her private rights? Such issues do not undo Jagodzinsky's case, but they deserve lengthier consideration.

Most problematic, in my view, is the final chapter, on Aphra Behn's *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, which Jagodzinsky reads as a parody of the pious legend of Mary Magdalene and characterizes as a pornographic novel. There is a fundamental split in feminism between those who think that sexuality expressed in pornography is liberating and the view that it is exploitative and debasing. My sympathies are with the latter group. So it seems to me that the experience of reading pornography (if that is a proper characterization of Behn's novel) is just the reverse of private reading at its best. Instead of liberating it habituates and enslaves, instead of humanizing it dehumanizes, instead of forming an independent subject it leads to dependency and disindividuation. Its casualties include the male reader as well as the female victim. If Jane Eyre had secreted herself in the window seat to read *Justine*, instead of Bewick's *History of British Birds*, her individual development and the outlines of her story would have been very different and, I think, less satisfactory.

But I do not mean to be overly critical. As a whole, Jagodzinsky's book is extraordinarily informative and suggestive. In the nature of things it is difficult or impossible to prove whether any particular factor

such as reading is the root cause of a particular cultural change, since there is small agreement concerning even what may be called the direction of causation in such matters. But Jagodzinsky makes a strong probable case for what she argues: that private reading was, at the least, importantly involved in the growth of a positive sense of privacy during the seventeenth century. Her great strength is her generous use of primary materials and her careful accumulation of historical details and inferences. She deals at times with "theory," as one must, but happily she is not enslaved to it. One result of reading her book will be to send her readers to the primary texts she studies for further consideration. A few of these texts, such as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and Margaret Cavendish's *Playes*, will likely be familiar. Most will represent a first encounter. The major works of any period are the ones most worth reading, but the minor works provide invaluable evidentiary background. As critics from Rosemond Tuve to Christopher Hill have shown, nothing is more helpful to good scholarship than wide reading and familiarity with the historical background. That is also the basic and laudable assumption of *Privacy and Print*.

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