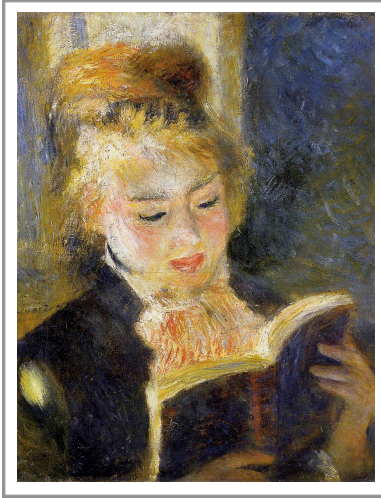


Hollowing Out the Habits of Attention

Getting serious

In my earlier post on attentiveness, I lamented the decline in book reading that has



become a regular feature of contemporary life.

Most people realize that reading is in decline, as distractions like the i-phone, Facebook and text messaging assert their

hegemony over our mental spaces. Professor Katherine Hayles, who teaches English at Duke University, expressed the concerns of many when she confessed, “I can’t get my students to read whole books anymore.” When English graduates don’t even like to read anymore, you know things are getting serious.

What has bypassed most people, however, is that the main reading problem we face as a society is not simply that people aren’t reading enough; rather, the real problem is how we read. Increasingly, we find that when people pick up a book, they often come to it with the same set of expectations they bring to the internet. Activities like Facebook and Twitter exert their dominion over our minds precisely because they condition us with a certain set of expectations that become ubiquitous and which remain with us even when our computer or i-phone is turned off.

More specifically, our constant saturation in digital distractions is training us to be satisfied with triviality, to be content with dialogue that is shallow, brief and disconnected. In short, we begin to expect books to give us the same buzz that an i-

phone provides, and when it doesn’t, we quickly get bored.

How we read

One result of this is that the actual process of reading has undergone a shift. A study in 2008 by the group nGenera looked at the effect of the internet on the young. They interviewed six thousand children who had grown up using the internet. The Lead researcher wrote that “Digital immersion has even affected the way they absorb information. They don’t necessarily read a page from left or right and from top to bottom. They might instead skip around, scanning for pertinent information of interest.” The thing that made this study so alarming was that it showed that the way we read webpages—skipping around, scanning, getting the information we need and then moving on to something else—is affecting our thought life even when we are not at the computer.

The internet is literally re-wiring our brains, making it increasingly difficult to sustain the type of thoughtful interplay between author and reader that gives book-reading its unique quality. When we do read books, it is becoming typical to take frequent breaks to check our phone for messages or to go on Facebook to see what our friends are doing. Indeed, everything about our digital distractions militates against the experience of patient attentiveness.

If you think I’m exaggerating, ask yourself or your friends the following questions.

- Do you find books boring if they do not give you the same fix that things like text messaging and IM provide?
- Do you find it hard to have a meal, or a long conversation with someone, without feeling compelled to check your messages in the middle?
- If someone challenges you about your use of social media like Facebook and text messaging, do you feel defensive and find it difficult to engage in a rational conversation about it?

☛When you sit down to read a book, do you find yourself skipping and scanning for relevant information like you would do on a webpage?

Using the internet

The internet is hollowing out our habits of attention because our brains are coming to crave the type of triviality that the internet breeds and feeds. The algorithms that Google uses to prioritize search results, and which are being replicated by social media sites like Facebook, are specifically designed to privilege information that is current over what is enduring. Consequently, it's easy to let ourselves be trained into thinking that what is important is not what is enduring but



what is current, fresh, up-to-date and transitory. Indeed, if we are not careful, things like text messages, comments on blogs and emails begin to exert more primacy over our minds than the books which point us away from the tyranny of the present to the stability of the past. (I discuss this further in my earlier article, [‘The Worldview of Facebook.’](#))

This doesn't mean that the internet is bad, or that you shouldn't use the internet to read good articles, such as the articles on this website. But we should try to learn how to use the internet in a way that doesn't hollow out our habits of attentiveness.

The Taylor Study Method recently published [an incredibly helpful series of posts](#) giving some practical steps on how to use the

internet in a way that doesn't detrimentally alter your brain. One of the main things they emphasize is the importance that we remain aware of the challenges we face in our digital age.

Again, the real challenges brought by the internet are easily overlooked, since it has nothing to do with what actually happens when we are engaged in activities web-surfing, Facebook or Twitter, but what happens when we are not engaged in these activities. Just as the problems caused by pornography sometimes only become evident when a man tries to have a relationship with a real woman, so the problems caused by social media may only become evident when one actually tries to read a book or engage in a normal conversation.

I was at a party last year where I was talking to a teenager, and a couple minutes into our conversation he began checking and reading his email on his phone. I was shocked by the rudeness of his behavior, and even more shocked when subsequent experience confirmed that this type of behavior is no longer even considered disrespectful. Since then I have angered people because I asked them to wait until we had finished our conversation before they started using their laptops to go online.

The inefficiency of books?

As our attention spans are being hollowed out, fewer and fewer people still read books for the sheer pleasure of doing so. As Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan wrote in [iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind](#):

“Young people have created their own digital social networks, including a shorthand type of language for text messaging, and studies show that fewer young adults read books for pleasure now than in any generation before them.... After all, why spend time staring at a dull and stagnant string of words when they could be entertained and informed with fast-

paced visual and auditory computer images instead?”

Not everyone avoids books because they prefer to be entertained. For many, books are avoided because they are perceived to be an inefficient use of time. In an age that tends to value efficiency above all else, our paradigm for learning tends to be based (often unconsciously) on the model of factory production in which everything has to have measurable benefits. Taking 20 minutes every morning to read from a book has enormous benefits, but they are not measurable. Thus, many people in the younger generation have concluded that it is better to save time by getting quickly getting the information one needs of the internet and then going on to the next thing. This was reflected in the all-too typical statement of a young man named Joe O’Shea, former president of the student body at Florida State University and a 2008 recipient of a Rhodes Scholarship. O’Shea said, “I don’t read books. I go to Google, and I can absorb relevant information quickly.” He continued: “Sitting down and going through a book from cover to cover doesn’t make sense. It’s not a good use of my time, as I can get all the information I need faster through the Web.”

Maybe we can get the information faster on the web, but what is being lost is the type of enlargement of being that only books can offer. Through reading we are able to expand our souls beyond our own limitations and connect with the thoughts and feelings of others. Sadly, however, the current bestsellers suggest that this is not why people are reading books: the proliferation of self-help books, biographies of famous people and fiction that is pure escapism suggests that the majority no longer reads to cultivate the imagination or improve the mind.

Slow, strange magic

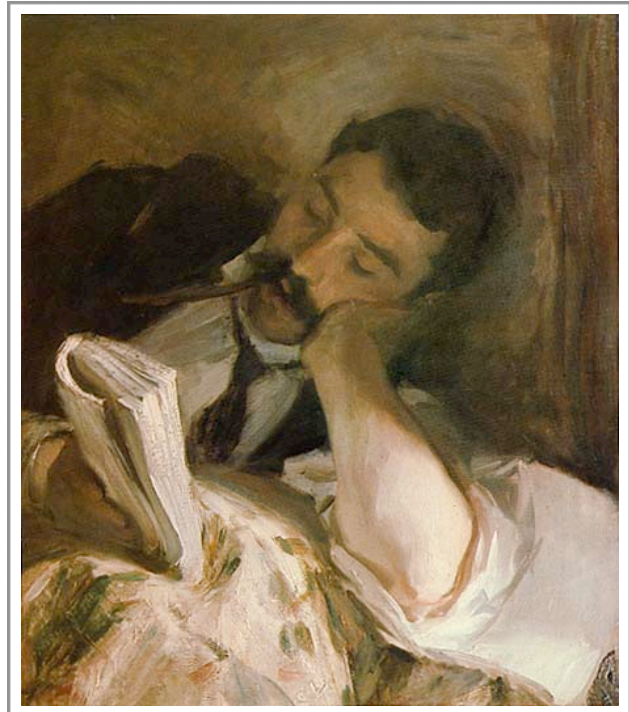
In a society that values efficiency over depth and productivity over quality, it is becoming increasingly hard to let books work their slow

and strange magic on us, to let them change us into richer and deeper people. Reading soul-enlarging old books becomes one of the chief casualties in this cultural shift to prioritize what is functional over what is beautiful, what is transitory over that which is permanent and what is entertaining over what is enriching.

The ramifications of a loss in quiet attentiveness also affect the set of expectations we bring to relationships, and our ability to empathize with those we love. But that will be the topic of a future post in this series.

Robin Phillips

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ALMIGHTY GOD, GRANT US, WE PRAY

S. BESLER, 1574-1625
HERR. GOTTVATER

BRIAN L. PENNEY, 2013

1. Al - migh - ty God, grant us, we pray, That all Your words we
2. Di - rect us by Your Spir - it, Lord, And by Your liv - ing,
3. Stir up in us, O Lord, we pray, Our wills to faith - ful -
4. All praise to God, the Fath - er be, And praise to Christ Who

hear this day; Would by Your grace new life im - part, And
ho - ly Word; That all our lives show forth Your praise, For
ly o - bey; So we pur - sue all god - li - ness, That
set us free; Who with the Spir - it we a - dore, For -

bring forth fruit in ev' - ry heart.
we are tro - phies of - Your grace.
leads to heav'n - ly bless - ed - ness.
ev - er and for - ev - ver - more.

