

# Learning Matters

Russell Whitehead

## Inhaling the atmospheres of irony

The last three columns dwelt on questions and answers, and now it's time to turn to proportion, degree, comparison, and so on.

Sitting here (in mid-September) on the balcony of a hotel room in the Swiss Alps, I am confronted by some very self-assured mountains. Several issues ago, I touched upon the business of mountains, hills, East Anglian flatness, and the internalised meanings of such words. As an inhabitant of the flatlands, I am sitting here now at a height (1,500 metres) which I believe may exceed any point in the UK, certainly in England. And yet these other green, brown and white hulks opposite loom still further upwards.

Is it all strictly *necessary*, I ask myself? So much effort to go up, when you've only to come down again? Plus, you can't see all of the sky properly... This is the sort of thing a native speaker of English tends to think when confronted by fully conjugating languages. 'I say, old chap(ess), couldn't you have made do with an *-s* for third person and left it at that? Yours seems so, well, over the top, over-elaborate, if you don't mind my saying so...'

Actually, coping with sea-level flatness and coping with mountains have more in common than one might at first think. People thinking, 'Oh, jolly good, English doesn't really conjugate its verbs, decline its nouns, oblige all sorts of agreement or combined article-prepositions, and even seems oblivious to the gender of tables, chairs and so on,' will soon come to feel that these omissions of kindness are most robustly matched by the frankly appalling commission of phrasal verbs to cover apparently pretty much everything you ever wanted to say. And so it is with landscape. If you want to describe it, you have to be able to get at it. And the sheer engineering brilliance (and almost sheer digging effort) that went into constructing the funicular that heaved us up here (and will in due course let us down again – not the phrasal verb kind of 'let down', please note) is probably quite nicely matched by that which went into claiming the fecund fields of eastern England and the Holland – the *Netherlands* – from the sea. And of course global warming bonds us all by somehow linking the melting snow and the encroaching sea.

Anyway – back to the opening terms. I have with me here Sven Bickerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies: the Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994,

Faber and Faber London). There's no getting away from it: Mr Bickerts is not a happy man. He's enormously cross about what computers and the internet are doing to us.

I think you need to be something like my age (just guess) to appreciate his gloomy irritation. If you grew up in the internet age – if you started learning and teaching languages with different languages freely available over the web, with multi-media splendours commonplace to you, CD-ROMs stuffed with generousities of activities always to hand, and so on – then you are, in the fullest sense of the term, a 'spoilt' learner/teacher. And you represent the new world that Bickerts finds so very far from being brave.

If, on the other hand, you have not as yet engaged with the world of the internet – if your home (like the homes of my sister and partner, my mother, my father and stepmother, my parents-in-law...) is full of books and empty of computers – then you are still in the world that Bickerts sees collapsing. But without the comparison you may not understand what's bothering him so much.

That's why, my friends, you need to be just like me. A traveller *from* paradise. You need to have grown up without computers and to find yourself now surrounded by them, to be unable to earn your living without using them. Then you can get the most out of the guidebook that Bickerts has prepared for your journey.

Before we tuck into him, I would observe that his travels are definitely situated in a certain European and indeed Christian cultural line – but I would also say I'm pretty sure that his ideas echo with fair equivalence across the globe.

In a particularly aromatic onion of layered or deep reading, Bickerts cites Robert Darnton summarizing Rolf Engelsing:

*From the Middle Ages until sometime after 1750, according to Engelsing, men read "intensively". They had only a few books – the Bible, an almanac, a devotional work or two – and they read them over and over again, usually aloud and in groups, so that a narrow range of traditional literature became deeply impressed on their consciousness. By 1800 men were reading "extensively". They read all kinds of material, especially periodicals and newspapers, and read it only once, and then raced on to the next item.*

It's like Hamlet, when Polonius asks him, 'What do you read, my lord?' and he replies, 'Words, words, words.' Is there a difference in the way we read words? When I was at university, people asked what you 'read', meaning what subject you were studying. In fact, *reading* English Literature involved pre- and post-1800 reading behaviour. There were bits of books that I became entirely absorbed in and then there were helter skelter races to Hoover up the key texts of a whole century in a few weeks. You need to choose your battles. As Philip Gilbert Hamerton says in *Intellectual Life*, 'The art of reading is to skip judiciously.'

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here. We need to remember that before you consider the reading activity, you have to consider the reading material available. Back to Bickerts:

*Newspapers, magazines, brochures, advertisements, and labels surround us everywhere – surround us, indeed, to the point of having turned our waking environment into a palimpsest of texts to be read, glanced at, or ignored.*

Literacy and printing (and distribution) have advanced so far that pre-1800 reading – as the only way of reading – seems a little hard to envisage.

*In our culture, access is not a problem, but proliferation is. And the reading act is necessarily different than it was in its earliest days. Awed and intimidated by the availability of texts, faced with the all but impossible task of discriminating among them, the reader tends to move across surfaces, skimming, hastening from one site to the next without allowing the words to resonate inwardly.*

Yes, Hamlet wasn't scrolling through endless Google search material, he was poring over one or a few pages of one bound book. Bickerts says, 'The possibility of maximum focus is undercut by the awareness of the unread texts that await.' The irony here is that Hamlet's 'maximum focus is undercut', not only by Polonius' interruption, but also by the awareness of the undone revenge of his father's murder most foul.

OK, back to the big picture, the Bickerts panorama tour. There is change, and the change is not good:

*What is most conspicuous as we survey the general trajectory of reading across the centuries is what I think of as the gradual displacement of the vertical by the horizontal – the sacrifice of depth to lateral range, or, in Darnton's terms above, a shift from intensive to extensive reading.*

(In Saussure's terms, I suppose Bickerts is saying that the syntagmatic, the whole sentence, is under threat from the sheer volume of variety, of possible substitutions available paradigmatically. Or, put another way, how can you hope to have a proper diachronic perspective, and understanding through history, or of history, if you are simply overwhelmed by the vastness of the synchronic present in which you are effectively trapped?)

Much of the world is very absorbed or preoccupied by perceptions only of the present. People look at other people on TV, in newspapers, and so on, and make comparisons; people know where they fit in the present. But maybe we understand less about our relationship to the past. This bothers Bickerts:

*We are experiencing in our times a loss of depth – a loss, that is, of the very paradigm of depth. A sense of the deep and natural connectedness of things is a function of vertical consciousness. Its apotheosis is what was once called wisdom. Wisdom: the knowing not of facts but of truths about human nature and the processes of life.*

Wisdom's all gone, he says. Quantity has done for quality. There's no system, just people being clever and reading too quickly:

*Indeed, we tend to act embarrassed around those once-freighted terms – truth, meaning, soul, destiny... We suspect the people who use such words of being soft and nostalgic. We prefer the deflating one-liner that reassures us that nothing need be taken that seriously; we inhale the atmospheres of irony.*

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Since I started this column on the Swiss balcony (and I like Swiss balconies; I started my book-writing career on a Swiss balcony), I've had a trip to Bilbao, where they speak Basque, and another to Barcelona, where they speak Catalan. This has enabled me to indulge one of my very favourite bewilderments – the perusing of the bits of travel guidebooks that are called things like 'language essentials' or 'survival language'. Well, yes, of course they're useless – they take no account of any reply that you will get (which will of course completely flummox you), and anyway if you don't speak Basque or Catalan reasonably well, it's just easier for the local people to use English with foreigners. But the real point is that they have nothing to do with learning a language. Nescafé have spent decades and millions trying to achieve a way of approximating instantly to coffee; you surely don't think you can step off a horrible Easyjet flight and communicate instantly in another language, do you?

Teachers and learners have known forever that you need to get above, or below, the phrasebook level, to go deeper than a list of atomised slices. You need to put stuff together, to engage with the system of language. You need conjugations, conjunctions, collocations... Such a process of learning, of really close reading, gives you depth and comprehension of a system.

Phrasebooks are the true home of the 'deflating one-liner' (to go back to before the asterisk) and operate on an assumption that we are content to 'inhale the atmospheres of irony', speaking but knowingly not communicating meaningfully with anyone.

Meanwhile, anyway, Bickerts is worried about the effect this is having on us all, the way

*we inhale the atmospheres of irony. Except, of course, when our systems break down and we hurry to the therapist's office. Then, trying to construct significant narratives that include and explain us, we reach back into that older lexicon. "My life doesn't seem to make sense – things don't seem to mean very much." But the therapist's office is a contained place, a parenthetic enclosure away from the general bustle. Very little of what happens there is put into general social circulation. Few people would risk exposing their vulnerable recognitions to the public glare.*

Actually, my dear friend Andre Simonovicsz, a Freudian analyst with little time for the lightness of therapy and counselling – 'cognitive – pah!' – would perhaps see them almost as extensive, surface discussions. Real, full analysis, he would say, reaches deeper, reads intensively, studies minutely, and really does aim for wisdom.

And I think Bickerts and Andre might get on rather well. Bickerts mourns the loss of the hope of

*comprehending the whole and relation of parts. To comprehend: to "hold together." We once presumed that those parts added up, that there was some purpose or explanation to our being here below. [...] The explosion of data – along with general societal secularization and the collapse of what the theorists call "master narratives" (Christian, Marxist, Freudian, humanist...) – has all but destroyed the premise of understandability.*

This is definitely a step on from merely observing that reading habits have changed. The cause and effect relationship is very clear for Bickerts: change your way of reading and you change the world, or at least the way you see the world (which is pretty much the same thing). And it's all, basically, down to the

Trojan horse upon which I am tapping these very words:

*Instead of carrying on the ancient project of philosophy – attempting to discover the "truth" of things – we direct our energies to managing information. The computer, our high-speed, accessing, storing, and sorting tool, appears as a godsend. It increasingly determines what kind of information we are willing to traffic in; if something cannot be written in code and transmitted, it cannot be important.*

Now, before going anywhere else here, I want to insert a little caveat in all this. My purpose here is not a whole or comprehensive reading of Bickerts. I am dabbling almost ironically in all this, inhaling a little, exhaling more. It does seem to me that many questions are begged throughout this thesis. Is wisdom dependent upon literacy, upon print? How truly universal is Bickerts' franchise of knowledge? And so on.

Nonetheless the big thing for Bickerts – and for sure for me too, and I truly hope for the readers of this column (and I hope you're reading intensively, because there sure ain't enough of you to make it extensive...) – is the importance of the desire to reach for the whole picture. It's language learning, isn't it, or education, in its true and proper sense? How do you get beyond I speak a 'petit peu blah blah' of a language to a proper mastery of it? You have to build, thoughtfully, a decent working interlanguage, and push on.

*Wisdom has nothing to do with the gathering or organizing of facts – this is basic. Wisdom is a seeing through facts, a penetration to the underlying laws and patterns. It relates the immediate to something larger. [...] One must believe in the possibility of a comprehensible whole. [...] It is one thing to absorb a fact, to situate it alongside other facts in a configuration, and quite another to contemplate that fact at leisure, allowing it to declare its connection with other facts, its thematic destiny, its resonance.*

When I started university, I found the various college and faculty libraries at Oxford intimidating. There was so much text there, and I knew I should read all of it intensively. And that I would never manage to do that. When I started teaching EFL (as it was still confidently known then), there wasn't that much actual teaching-text available. Now there is of course a vast, actual and virtual, world of it. So where should learners look? How should they tackle this myriad data? What should a teacher marshal from this crowded world to assist in the small endeavour of one person learning some more of a language than he or

she already speaks? I have, frankly, no idea, other than breathing deeply. I remember my tutor, Professor Valentine Cunningham, at Corpus Christi College, quoting with delight the extremely brief (intensive?) essay he said one student had written in his final exams. Addressing the question, 'How should one read James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*?' (that massive and hugely difficult modernist text), he wrote, simply, 'slowly'.

In learning and especially in teaching languages, we really do need to think deeply about where we are situated. We musn't get so filled with the heady aromas of on-line this and blended learning that that we lose our sense of direction. Language is globalizing, regardless of whatever it is that we do to pay the rent, and we should be constantly, intensively and extensively, trying to understand, to comprehend.



*Russell Whitehead has been a teacher and self-access co-ordinator and now writes books, CD-ROMs and on-line materials and tests.*