

Jeremy Fernando, *Reading Blindly: Literature, Otherness and the Possibility of an Ethical Reading* (Cambria Press, 2009)

In *Reading Blindly: Literature, Otherness and the Possibility of an Ethical Reading*, Jeremy Fernando aims to show that reading at its most complete cannot be conclusive. The blindness of the title is the astonishment of the pharisaic in us on its self-important mission to destinations, dropped to its knees by the sudden removal of certainty.

Fernando takes as his central trope the kind of wiping clean of habitual perception suggested by the account of Paul, given insight in being robbed of his presumption to farsightedness. In his view, the reader only becomes truly cognizant in understanding that the form of consciousness that supposes itself central to the act of reading is constituted by continual displacement, a projection forward reminiscent of Heidegger's thrownness of self into the world. In this account of it, reading can be imagined as similar to a steadily advancing spotlight into which the shadows of objects also themselves once brightly lit and now left in darkness are cast, partial recollections of lost familiars.

The book makes intriguing and convincing play with this idea of knowledge being available only to those blind to the enticements of the habitual, an agnostic enlightenment. But Jeremy Fernando does more than elaborate in the margins of this figure of blind insightfulness; too much of that would run the risk of parodying the understanding he advocates, not promoting his argument. Though he does explain, does elucidate from the perspective of the conventionally sighted, he as often enacts the orientation he recommends, especially in those sections in which he addresses the problems set (if not always faced down as courageously as they are here) for one who would hold simultaneously that reading is best when most non-prescriptively open, and the necessity for reading to be grounded ethically. (In a sense, though not quite Fernando's sense, both Sartre and Derrida have anticipated this difficulty in their attempts to square the free play of signification with their versions of Marxism.)

In the section subtitled 'Spinning, Mixing, Scratching, Cutting, Stabs' of Chapter Six (133-9), 'A Pact with the Devil' in the Introduction (1-14), and 'Blind Ethics, or Close Your Eyes (to) See the Third' of Chapter One (31-41), Fernando takes us with him as he works through his attempts to mesh an absolute independence in reading with an ethics which is, necessarily, communally referred.

It is a bold project, and adroitly executed. It has, too – perhaps surprisingly – something to it of one of those venerable renegade faiths which considered themselves central to revelation even as they were marginalized by the orthodox; one of the Gnostic modes of construing text and world which proclaimed the possibility of interpretative purity freed from notions of original sin that seized the devotional imagination and devastated self trust.

This belief in the possibility of an unself-centred freedom of reading aligning naturally with virtue in the reader is valuable for the questions it raises as it is for the incisiveness of Fernando's investigation. It is certainly preferable to its opposites – the ideas that we are either helplessly preformed by largely uninspectable predispositions, or bound consciously to read according to conventions whose truth

has been decided for us by long usage, whether we like it or not: the reader either as unconsciously a dupe to convention or its willing helot.

Those questions are pressing. For instance, crucially: how are we to keep an awareness of our tendency to damaging foreclosure from becoming an obstruction to reading freely? How might we prevent a sanitary self-awareness of readers reading themselves reading from descending to the kind of (rather *unkind*) stop-go, by the line and by the phrase, obsessive self-inspection to which some reader response theories (Stanley Fish's, arguably) are prone? How, remaining aware of those pre-emptive strikes against expansiveness to which we are inclined, are we to stop ourselves reading academically in an undesirable way, blue pencil ever in hand, enjoyment banished in disgrace for its wantonness?

Put another way: what would be an appropriate distance from the page for the critical eye? Is fluency always to be mistrusted absolutely? In a writer, perhaps, but as a reader? If one should mistrust it, what would be those signs by means of which the reader might distinguish a legitimate surge of (relatively) selfless joining with the text, of climbing adequately dressed on board, from that surge of satisfaction deriving from dogma underwritten, yet again? How to avoid the deadening sense, drawn from long familiarity, of knowing all too well what one hardly knows at all? To shuck off hyperactive self-scrutiny as well as the ennui of the long habituated?

In confronting head on the difficulties of any attempts, including his own, to reconcile individuality and ethical responsibility, Jeremy Fernando's book provokes such crucial questions as well as setting out his position in alluring detail. The book belies its title, as it was meant to; that is a measure of its success.

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