WHY READ BOOKS?

DEAN’S LECTURE, AUGUST 30, 1996

EVA T. H. BRANN

As always, this opening lecture is dedicated to our freshmen. There is a Greek saying: Arché de toi hémisu pantōs: “The beginning is, in truth, half of the whole.” I recall the saying because it sat above the first lesson of my Greek book in college, and it meant: You’d better learn these case endings thoroughly or else. But I want to take the saying on a nobler plane — as a reminder that what we, your teachers and fellow students, say to you in this first week is likely to have a special influence and to mark your four years here to some degree. So it seems to me important to alert you right away to one of the ways of your new community: a lecture, a prepared, uninterrupted pronouncement of some length, is in this college mainly the occasion for a conversation, either in the question period immediately afterwards, or later on, when you are very welcome —and this is no merely polite invitation — to visit me to talk more at less distance. The topic, or rather the question of this lecture “Why read books?” fits with this approach. All of you, as I know from reading your applications, do in fact read books, and you came here to read more of them and to do it better. It is the one thing you all have in common, this love of books. But what we do here is to question the facts and attachments of our lives, and that is the world of which you have now become a part. It has always seemed absurd to me, and a sign of how little experience the world in general has in asking real questions, that “questioning” should be felt as something hostile, as an interrogation intended to destroy self-confidence and faith, as if a call to question your own life and its assumptions were an invitation to undermine the ground you stand on. That may happen, to be sure, and cause you some difficult times, but it can never be the first, good-faith intention of question-raising. Questions are raised so that the mental ground you occupy will not be as a hard-trodden asphalt-covered barren parking lot for your thoughts but the tilled and turned-over soil of a growing garden of ideas. When I ask myself and you “Why read books?,” I don’t mean “What’s the point?” but rather “There’s more to this than I thought.”

Before I pursue my question for the evening, I want to add a dedication. This, my seventh and last opening lecture, is dedicated
to the seniors as well. We have something very particular in common, because for all of us, you and me, it will be the last year of an epoch in our lives. You, however, will turn into alumni and will take up a new life, while I will return to my old occupations, reading books and teaching. And this mirror image of our fates makes me want to tell you something I have learned in the dean's office. Some of you will recall how fiercely — and ineffectually — I resisted being called "the administration." Why? Because the deans are in their proper being students and teachers in the program who have taken time out to fulfill a particular duty in this community that needs to be done, and by our polity, must be done by tutors. This constitution of ours embodies a rule that governs this institution of learning as a whole. This rule is: First think, then act. If this rule is a good one, it justifies the four years you have taken out of your normal life as active participants in the world of action. First you were given time and occasion to think, and now you are ready to seize the opportunity to do deeds.

The strange fact is that few people in institutions of learning believe in this rule anymore. Some think that you learn to live by living and others think that it's enough to learn to make a living. Pragmatism and vocationalism are the short-hand terms for these beliefs. I am here to tell you that these notions have got to be wrong. I cannot tell you why it is so, but we human beings are so constituted that we cannot do these two things at once: think and act. I believe this fact of life has to do with the ever-enigmatic nature of time: the time of receptive contemplation is radically different from the time of decisive action. That is not to say that there is not much thought-like activity in action: prospective imagining, provident figuring, careful calculating, summary intuiting. But in action all these mental activities are exercised as by a sleepwalker whose safety rests on the habits of another life and who had better not try to wake up. Deans know that; some even like it.

Aristotle, it seems to me, has it absolutely right in the third book of the Nicomachean Ethics: the life of deliberation, which is the mental side of the active life, needs a capital of prior truths, theories and, above all, ends, a capital that is accumulated in contemplation. When you go into action you must already know what working hypotheses you will adopt, what you think about human nature in general, and most importantly what you love and want to bring about or save. It was in order to build up this fund of
Why Read Books

theories, insights and attachments that you came to this place of leisure — and it is never out of place to remind us all that the word “school” comes from the Greek word for leisure, scholé. But something not unexpected will happen. As you draw down even a mental capital, you deplete it, you wear down the detailing that gives particularity to your thought, you compact and pare it into usable phrases; in short it undergoes what thought tolerates even less than fruit: canning. It is to prevent this normal canning of thought in active life that our alumni all over the country regularly hold seminars and read books together.

Have I gotten away from “Why read books?,” my opening question? I think not. In this school books are the means of choice for occasioning thought. There is a lovely archaic usage for a common word. In Psalm 119 (v. 147) of the King James version we read: “I prevented the dawning of the morning,” meaning “My rising preceded that of the sun.” The reading of books properly prevents the thinking of thoughts, in the sense of preceding it. Might it also sometimes prevent it in the sense of presenting an obstacle to thinking? Are reading and contemplation in league or at odds? That is a question that has always puzzled me, but does so especially now that I am not far from returning to study. It may well interest you also, who are about to begin and who are about to conclude your studies, at least at the college.

I want to ask the question in parts, first “What is reading?,” then “What is a book?,” and finally “Why read books?”. I am following here Socrates’ teaching, which seems true to me, that to answer a “why” or “how” question well we must inquire “what” sort of thing the object of our interest is.

I. Reading

Reading has a wide sense. The word itself is related both to reasoning and to riddling. To read is both to think and to puzzle something out. We are said to read faces and character, the lie of the land and maps, the book of nature and evidence. Here reading means attending carefully both by scanning and fixing in detail on whatever is before the eyes or other senses — and making something of it. In the largest sense reading is interpretation. The primary Latin meaning of “interpreter” is go-between or broker, and that fits the activity of reader in the largest sense very well. This kind of interpreting reader knows how to go from a sign to
what it signifies; a reader knows how to negotiate the way between a sign and meaning. Theories of signification are a huge and deep subject. We do not study them explicitly in this program any more than we pick out other philosophical or linguistic subject matter, but the study you do here should set you up particularly well for more detailed inquiry into signification.

For the moment, let me provide a word for the object that reading, broadly understood, deals with: symbols. A symbol, in one frequent and well-warranted use of the word, is a sign that, whether intentionally or naturally, catches the attention on its own and at least in part reveals its significance through inspection. The word is Greek and means something joined or fitted together. When two parties were about to enter into a contract, say that one would act as broker to the other’s money, they would take a strip of clay, make a jagged cut through it and bake the halves. When the lender came for his deposit, he had the fitting half as proof of ownership. A symbol is therefore a token meaningful through its sensory attributes. For example, if someone were to receive a bouquet of skunk cabbage from a neighbor as a token of esteem, the recipient would know what to think through exercising the sense of smell.

Reading in the wide sense is therefore the skill of interpreting symbols, which presupposes the ability to discern which among the multitude of objects we perceive are in fact symbolic; this ability is anticipated by a far more fundamental disposition: the disposition to see everything whatsoever on occasion as pointing beyond itself. This inclination to regard nothing that appears as a dead end seems to me to be as human a characteristic as anything can be. I would go so far as to say that if any creature displays it, it has honorary membership in the human race and is entitled to all the privileges and immunities thereunto appertaining. Dolphins and chimpanzees may well turn out to be candidates. The human being may then be defined as the reading animal.

But besides symbols, which are to be looked at, there are also signs, usually, though not always, of a conventional sort, signs that are meant to be looked not at but through. I say “usually” rather than “always” because there may be certain physical signs which are to be observed as, say, symbols of some disease, but are to be seen through and overlooked as signs of human nature, such as a bodily deficiency. But the class I am speaking of is mostly conventional, that is, it functions by a convention, an agreement which is usually published in a dictionary-like list somewhere. The
signs that I am particularly thinking of are letters. The letters themselves as well as their order are largely conventional, which means they do not signify on their own — else why would one need agreement and dictionary? “Conventional” is often and sensibly opposed to “natural,” and in this context the difference is that what is natural reveals itself for what it is or does and what is conventional needs the aid of instruction, as an image of a dolphin reveals what it is an image of by being looked at, while the capital letter Q is not a sperm fertilizing an egg; which is what it looks like, nor could anyone guess that in English words it needs to be followed by a U. To be sure, some of the letters of the Western alphabet started as pictograms, and others were interpreted as pictures. For example the capital letter Delta, shaped like a triangle, gave its name to the spreading alluvial mouth of a river, and the capital letter Lambda, originally an inverted chevron one of whose legs was shorter than the other, gave its name to the mother of the great Corinthian house of the Cypselids, because she had the same characteristic. Herodotus tells her remarkable story in his fifth book (92). So also a meaning was sometimes found in the conventional order of the alphabet or ABC. Some Romans evidently read in the sequence that sits in the middle of the ABC, L-M-N, the word elementum, making an analogy between the order of letters and the elements of nature. Since wherever convention is strongly involved, history becomes the primary source of explanation, knowing the history of our alphabet is the necessary way into the reasons for its present state, and a wonderful story it is. But to my mind, its most wonderful aspect, one with deep causes and great consequences, is how soon and completely the letters become mere signs with none but assigned functions.

And that brings me to reading in the narrow sense, the kind of reading peculiarly appropriate to books. Here is what I mean. Recall the painful days — they were for me at six — of learning to read. Recall how your eye stopped at the letter, how you laboriously and haltingly spelled out each word. Letters stood between you and the sounded words, and every desire was to return to the companionable ease of being read to. Then one day, perhaps rather suddenly, everything clicked. The letters disappeared, often even the sound, and you were in the book. I remember my first silently read book with a kind of reinforced vividness because it was exactly the one title that Rousseau recommends in his Émile, the text on the upbringing of children that obscurely influenced European
parents for generations down to my own. This "marvelous book" was Robinson Crusoe (Book III), and reading it by myself had an effect not unlike the one Rousseau imagined: a tremendous sense of withdrawal from the social world, of being on my own, of imagining myself capable of being self-subsisting. (I should say, parenthetically, that it was a child's version I read, and I discovered only later that this aboriginal self-help book is actually also a chronicle of the blackest depression and god-foresakenness.)

The wonder then of reading in the narrowest sense, of alphabetical reading, is that the letters disappear. Or perhaps it is possible to say that they are transparent, as Aristotle understands transparency in On the Soul (II, 7). He says that the transparent is not visible in itself but takes its visibility, its color, from something else. So the letters are no longer seen in their own shape, but as they convey the story told. It is a good way of saying that letters are the medium par excellence.

You all know that there are quite a few other ways of noting down what is in the mind: particularly pictographs, ideograms, hieroglyphics. What characterizes these notations in their pure form (they are usually mixed with conventional signs) is that the eye notes them and should not immediately read past them. They are not mere media but mean something in themselves. For example, it is insufficient but possible to decipher a Chinese poem just by looking at its characters: here is a stylized but recognizable mountain; here is a person, the ideograms looking very much like the lambda above. They occur in the first line of Wang Wei's poem "Dear Park," which is in fact about an empty mountain and unseen people (Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei). In the West too we have partly symbolic scripts, for instance musical notations, in which rising notes climb up the staff. Even mathematical notation is partly symbolic — the equal sign of an equation is as the fulcrum of a balance.

So by and large it is alphabetical writing alone that is a pure medium. Most of the so called media — recall that "medium" means a middle-thing, a go-between — are impure as hell. They crop and take an angle and omit, and so convey a cooked version of some far-off original speech or deed.

The purity of the letter medium seems to me to be of the very deepest significance. It means that we can be absorbed into a book in a most immediate way, and then again we can, at will, surface and attend to the literal level, the letter of the text. There are,
consequently, different kinds of reading. In classical antiquity scrolls were, it seems, read aloud by servants who did not, perhaps, quite understand what they were reading. Our tutor, Ms. Judy Seeger tells a great story which takes the point to its extreme. When she and her husband Tony, who is an anthropologist, lived with a preliterate tribe of the Amazon called the Suya, it once happened that the men, who were amused by Tony’s portable memory, had him transcribe a bunch of lewd jokes that he himself did not understand. The notebook was carried to the women’s side of the village and Ms. Seeger, who was equally innocent of the meaning, was made to read the writing aloud to the ladies of the tribe. Pandemonium ensued. Here letters are nothing but sound notations. Of course, reading aloud can also be a very companionable activity, and it is probably the most important educating that parents can do for little children.

The next stage in reading is recounted by Augustine in his *Confessions*. He tells with wonder of St. Ambrose, his teacher, that “when he was reading he drew his eyes along over the leaves, and his heart searched into the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent” (VI, 3). He did this, Augustine conjectures, because his time for leisure was short and he did not wish to have it intruded upon by the requests for clarifications of those who might be listening. The beginning of our prevalent way of reading is thus the shortness of leisure and withdrawal — time-deprivation and a need for privacy.

At a subsequent stage, I have no idea when attained, even the internally sounded letters were bypassed. I think that this is how most of us read; we hardly ever feel impelled even to move our lips. It is the kind of reading that makes correctness of spelling and punctuation so important, because unorthodox forms act as eye-catchers (sometimes, of course, that might be intended) and distract the reader from the matter. We all know how hurt we feel when we submit the thoughts of our mind to a reader who seems to see only the typo on the page. So when your tutor does that sort of subeditorial reading for you, it is to save your work from that distraction in the future.

There are, finally, all sorts of readings that new time constraints have made necessary and new techniques possible: skimming, speed-reading, listening to book tapes in the car, and reading off the teleprompter, which is a high-tech crib for public speakers.

Let me then suppose that the kind of reading most characteristic of this community is the extended silent reading which is largely, though not altogether, accomplished by the sort of visual scanning
that provides the most recessive sort of stimulation to sensation — set moreover in an environment as secluded and, one might say, as homeostatic, as little intrusive, as you can manage. What bodily positions and perceptual backdrop help you concentrate on this essentially non-physical activity is very much a matter of taste and as such probably not worth disputing — there is for instance the matter of background music, of auditory atmospherics.

It seems to me that silent reading and the seminar are two activities in search of each other. Casual, informal conversations should be a large part of your life out of class here, but the scheduled conversation that we call the seminar is in need of a guiding text, or, experience shows, it will end up producing the product after which the bull session is so felicitously named. But though it is true that the world round people program get-togethers about nothing and then wonder why it all seems so unprofitable, the more interesting question for us is why silent reading should require the complement of regular conversation. For in my opinion it is only half the story that you are required to prepare for seminar by doing your reading; the other half is that your reading requires the seminar. The reason is to be found in the way we are made: We have an inside and an outside, a private interior and a public exterior, and our internal activities — feelings and opinions — seek to become external; they long for expression, resonance and refutation. And silent reading, more than any other steady activity I know of, is capable of producing large stores of inner responses that are badly in need of untangling and testing or just of shining in the light of public conversation. I might go so far as to say that to sit apart and read and to come together and talk — that is the natural rhythm of the life of learning. So much for reading and its return to living speech.

II. Books

"To read" is a transitive verb, which means it normally takes an object. We read something, and there was a time when the most obvious object of reading in the narrow sense was a book. But that is no longer so — many things can now be read besides books. There are, it seems to me, two main sets of alternatives to book-reading. The differences are in what might be called "format" and "delivery." Format distinguishes reading matter such as articles in periodicals or collections, course packs, photocopied lectures and the like, from
bound books by single authors. Delivery refers to the physical substrate, the underlying bearer of the text, particularly the electronic alternative to the printed book.

There is no denying that some of the most epoch-making ideas have been announced in so-called "papers," short works published in periodicals. One great example among many is Einstein's 1905 paper on Special Relativity, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," which the seniors will be studying next semester.

Now it may seem like a very superficial way of looking at a text to ask whether it has the format of a flyer, of an article in a periodical (be it printed on mat, glossy, or pulp paper), of an off-print — or of a book. But facts are sometimes significant, and the fact is that the papers we take up are mostly read for the laboratory and are often known by their date, such as Einstein's "nineteen-o-five paper," while in the seminar we read almost exclusively wholes or parts of books, and only a few of us pay much attention to their dates of publication. Speaking very roughly, but not without some truth, I can say that differences in the format of writings often betoken deep distinctions in the things written about. It belongs to the character of science that it is carried forward by succinctly presentable discoveries. Both the fact that science is progressive, so that later work is presumed to present an advance, and the fact that each newly uncovered truth is in our tradition credited to its first discoverer, means that quick publication and clear chronology are crucial to the enterprise. Not so with literature and philosophy. In neither is there a reasonable presumption — or so it seems to us at this school — that the latest is the most creditable. Nor is there a premium on elegant succinctness or quick publication. We want books of literature to spread themselves pleasingly over our lives; we want books of philosophy to amplify their theses sufficiently; and we couldn't care less whose system or whose tale got out first — at least most of us here don't. I might say, parenthetically, that the generation of a good deal of non-scientific periodical literature is due to the attempt to bring the format of natural science to other human inquiries. If you are interested in the origin of this format and the philosophy behind it, look at the postscript of Bacon's *New Organon*, where you will find the aboriginal directions for modern research scholarship, albeit with many cautions that have been blatantly neglected, such as:
Never cite an author except in a matter of doubtful credit; never introduce a controversy except in a matter of great moment. And for all that concerns ornaments of speech, similitudes, treasury of eloquence, and such like emptinesses, let it be utterly dismissed. (Aphorism III.)

Anyhow, it is books that we read here, writings that are expansive in the physical space they occupy and independent of the time in which they were published — and that have yet one more feature: They have weight, physical gravity. The text is delivered in a material form, the writing has a tangible substrate. Less than a decade ago this feature would not have been worth noting. Almost all texts were written or printed onto an underlying, usually natural, material such as paper, parchment, or wood. The very name of a book and its paper tells as much. “Book” apparently comes from “beech,” referring to the source of the wooden tablets on which runes, the ancient Scandinavian letters, were inscribed, and “paper” comes from papyrus, the plant from which the ancient Egyptians made their writing material.

Now has arisen something truly new in the world — the immaterial electronic book. The electronic tablet itself is, to be sure, a material object, made of plastic and perhaps glass. But the writing is not on a material medium. And this fact has all sorts of thought-provoking consequences for reading. It is generally agreed that people who value the sight of their eyes and the alignment of their vertebrae would not think of reading a long book off a computer screen. Moreover, readers who like to carry the books they are involved with on their daily rounds will not find a computer monitor sufficiently portable. But comfort and portability will indeed be features of the not-so-far future when electronic tablets of handy size and with eye-saving screens will be readily available. Just think of what is in the offing: one slim tablet on which will appear, on demand, every text on our seminar list and every writing found worth scanning into its memory. The one tablet will be the repository of a large virtual library.

“Virtuality” is a word and a meaning that will, it is my guess, play a huge role in your lives after you leave us. To my mind, virtuality presents the next great human issue that our intellectual tradition has to digest. Virtuality is, I think, quite properly contrasted to reality. The particular meaning of the word “virtue” that “virtuality” turns into an issue is an old one. Virtue here means
the effect some thing or substance has, as the virtue of a drug. For example, a candidate for doctor of medicine, in Molière’s *Malade Imaginaire* or *The Hypochondriac*, who is being examined upon the cause and reason why opium makes one sleep, answers in hilarious pidgin-Latin thus:

Quia est in eo  
Virtus dormitiva,  
Cujus est natura  
Sensus assoupire. (Third Intermezzo.)

Because there is in it  
A sleepy-making virtue,  
Whose nature it is  
To lull the senses.

The *virtus* or virtue here is the cause which is identical with the effect. Virtuality then describes the condition in which virtue, or effect, has cast loose from the substance or thing, that is to say, from the reality, that underlies it. A virtual world is a world of apparitions that is effectively perceived but has no real, weighty, inertial, material world of things behind it. Its space is nowadays said to be cyberspace, which means control-space (from the Greek verb *kybernēein* to steer, guide or control). To my mind, the fascinating question of the early next century will concern the relation of virtuality to imagination, of cyberspace to imaginative space and of the virtual world to the world of the imagination. For it seems to me that they are in some respects happily coincident and in others bitterly at odds. But I’ve brought this preoccupation of mine in only to talk about libraries of books, virtual and real.

For it is the case that we’ve just built ourselves a beautiful new library, and moved our nearly hundred thousand volumes into it. I wish the freshmen had been here in spring on May 6th to see the whole community turn out for the Great Book Move. All day long lines of book-bag carrying students, tutors, and staff members wended their way across the front campus from the old library, now about to be the Barr-Buchanan Center, to the new Greenfield Library. Connie and Stewart Greenfield themselves worked most of the day carrying and shelving books, and there was a lovely spirit abroad.

The word “real” is Latin and means “thing-like.” Our new library was designed not only to house the books that we have accumulated since 1697, the date of our earliest acquisitions, but
also to have empty shelves for again as many books to come — real, thing-like books occupying real, thing-accommodating space. Our new library is, among other things, an announcement to the world that we mean to keep acquiring and reading real beech-and-paper books, housed in real cubic space, for quite a while.

III. Why Read Real Books?

So now the time has come to conclude by attempting an answer to the question of my title “Why read books?,” but in a new version: “Why read real books?”

In the beginning I insisted on the truly wondrous minimalism of reading in the narrow sense — how unobtrusive this Phoenician-Greco-Roman alphabet of ours is, a true medium, a recessive go-between. But I’ve noticed, as have all of us who have learned at this school to pay large attention to apparently trivial matters, that the less blatant is the appeal to the senses in an activity, the more opportunity there is for the noticing sensibility, for subtlety. And so it is with this activity: Just because there is so little for eye, ear and touch, the subtle circumstances matter a great deal. Let me therefore finish by setting out just a very few of those subtle, almost evanescent marks of reading real books and end by merely intimating how massively important they are to sublimating reading in the narrow technical sense into reading in the widest and grandest sense.

As I am composing this lecture, I am sitting within my personal library. The house holds maybe five thousand books, collected over five decades. What is moving, now that I’m paying attention, is how familiar the aspect of almost every book is. These are not mere book-volumes occupying mere space-volumes. Each is a place, a local concentration of eventful memory. I ask myself which volume out of these weighs the most with me and immediately find the Oxford Plato, two maroon-and-gold volumes of onion skin paper, crisp and compact, containing all the dialogues in Greek. And when I open one, a glimpse of Ionic columns carved from ivory-hued marble and an aroma of thyme-scented Aegean island paths emerges, as if from a magic chest. I bought these books probably in 1957, the year I came to this college, and one reason they have such strong sensory associations is that the Greek printed in them is still Greek to me. I bought them with the youthfully megalomaniac intention of reading, more and more fluently, all thirty-six genuine

Brann
dialogues in Greek and then the six spurious ones. That never happened and therefore the Greek text within these volumes retains after all these years the evocatory enchantment of a true spell. Books, then, serve as depositories of memory, but one would have to be a very distractable bibliophile to consider this their essential attribute. So that’s not it.

Some books are simply beautiful and being elaborately beautiful is their end-all. If any of you have ever seen old books with fore-edge painting you will know that books can be magical while yet half-closed. Fore-edging, now a lost art, makes a hidden picture come to view when the pages, gilded on their outer rims, are fanned. It is indeed pure magic, but it is the point of the book only for a collecting connoisseur. So that’s not it either. Anyhow I don’t own one of these wonders.

Some books in my library are full of strange signs and symbols, like nothing to be found on any keyboard, and intelligible only to me. These book-objects belong to me, and I can annotate them as I please — never, never, let me interject here, write in a library book — and I can make them the repository of my encoded comments over all the years and all the different readings. But I imagine that the virtual-text-tablets will eventually have a free-hand annotation capability by means of a stylus, so that’s not it either.

Since it is a well-researched fact that human place memory has a stupendous capacity, it is not surprising that I can find my way to certain passages in many books almost as I find my way to my friends’ houses. Well-read books are full of idea-addresses; in them thoughts have definite places in space. And now we’re getting close.

For what I’ve been in search of is the subtle influence that the peculiar material character of real books exercises on reading. I can think, as I said, of quite a few, but I will mention only the two that seem crucially important to me. I call them “simultaneity” and “intractability.”

By simultaneity I mean that, since books are stacks of leaves, all the text that tells the tale is there simultaneously, at once, in real space. You can stick in up to five fingers or any number of slips and by flipping back and forth read the linearly progressive text as a simultaneous architectural structure. At this finger-reading, usually the second time around, the conventional signs of the text allow a new level to emerge: symbolic reading. The letters are still suppressed, but the structure of the visible writing begins to work symbolically. Recall that a symbol is a sign that speaks by itself,
and the layout of the book, spatially perceived, does tell things on its own. For example, it is a fact that if you open your copy of Plato’s *Republic* at the nearly exact center of its pages —originally you would have unrolled a scroll — you will have before you the claim that Socrates’ beautiful city will never come into being “until either philosophers become kings or those now called kings and regents become genuine philosophers” (473 d) — and that is the most startling and most contentious assertion in this radical book. Here “center of the book” symbolizes “central to the book,” and you discover this by treating the text symbolically, that is, by letting its signs in their extension speak to you. One reason why great books are so often long books is that the elaboration of a textual architecture cannot help but need room, just as its discovery is meant to take time.

I am not saying that this kind of reading can’t also be done by scrolling a text on a monitor, but that the suggestive physical substrate, which gives the spatial sense of shape, will be missing.

Now to my second mark of a book, an even weightier one. By intractability I mean that a printed book resists revision, emendation, editing and any other sort of *ex post facto* interference. The text in the book once published is intractably persistent and recalcitrantly non-interactive. By contrast, there is evidently no perfect protection against alterations to an electronic text. In fact, commentators on literature in cyberspace extol the fluidity of electronic texts and the obliteration of a single responsible author. They welcome the disappearance of the definitive text and the advent of the continuously changing joint product. This instability will not only characterize the new texts specifically composed for the electronic medium, but also older ones, for we all know that there is no reasonable precaution or real protection against a determined cyberspace revisionist. No text is safe from a brilliant but conscienceless hacker. And since great works are nearly always finely calibrated, even a little change can have large consequences. That is why, although it is very necessary for the likes of you and me to take advice from those who are kind enough to correct our papers, really accomplished writers cannot condone even a small interference. For example, Lincoln, to my mind the greatest writer of American English, tells an editor about his editing:
Why Read Books

So far it is intended merely to improve in grammar, and elegance of composition, I am quite agreed; but I do not wish the sense changed, or modified, to a hair's breadth. And you, not having studied the particular points so closely as I have, can not be quite sure that you do not change the sense when you do not intend it. (To Charles C. Nott, May 31, 1860.)

Texts printed in books, then, have stability; they are the unalterable formulation of a definite, responsible author — some one particular person, who has thought it out and put it down. Of course, the author is usually not literally "responsible," that is, answerable, as someone who can be made to appear, respond, and answer in person. One excuse for authorial unresponsiveness is being dead, as most of our authors are. Another is the one given by Bishop Ambrose, Augustine's teacher, when he said that he read silently so that pupils wouldn't interrupt with questions addressed to him in the author's place. Yet another, the most formidable excuse, is that authors write books just in order to distance themselves from what they have worked out; the book may go abroad and make its rounds in public, but the author stays at home and is entitled to privacy. At the very end of this year the freshmen will read and the seniors will reread the Platonic dialogue Phaedrus. In it Socrates blames written works for just this intractable stability I mean to praise tonight. He says:

Writing, you know, Phaedrus, has this strange quality about it, which makes it really like painting: the painter's products stand before us quite as though they were alive; but if you question them, they maintain a solemn silence. So, too, with written words: you might think they spoke as though they made sense, but if you ask them anything about what they are saying, if you wish an explanation, they go on telling you the same thing, over and over forever. (275d.)

It's impossible to forget, though, that this dialogue itself was written by Plato, and that for all its lively conversation, the characters keep saying the same thing to each other up to its enthusiastic end. Here we can hear Socrates and Plato coming apart, and we see a new era of inquiry beginning — inquiry by reading.
For the written word, and above all, the printed book incite thought *just because* they are unbudgeably and solidly fixed. The printed book says what it says, and it is up to us to read it in the large sense, to puzzle it out and reason about it. It confronts us as a real thing in the world, which happens to contain as if by magic the fully realized thought of another human being. It incites our attention and our opposition by its sturdy and stolid independent existence. It demands our concentrated attention because it allows no clicking onto informational distractions. Its author is entitled to no agreement and no gratitude beyond what the book itself evokes. Thus it symbolizes whatever in life we come up against that will not give, and this reading of books in the widest sense, which is also called interpretation, is a skill eminently transferable to what is often called "the real world."

Now is the moment to finish by returning nearly full circle to an early question: Does reading books help or hinder thinking? I think the sober answer is, it does both. It helps thought because it draws us into the fully accomplished product of another's thought, and we in turn begin to think, to reason and puzzle, by sympathetic attraction or repulsion. It hinders thought for the very same reason: because in reading books we are partly outside of ourselves, and thinking goes on within. Then, to close the circle completely, why should we read books — read not this or that particular book but read as a lifelong activity?

The answer, or rather my answer for tonight, is now ready to be formulated — and therefore ready as well to be taken apart in the question period. Here it is:

Reading in the narrow sense accustoms us to look right past the conventional sign to the intended meaning; reading in the wide sense teaches us to dwell on the words to find the larger meanings; reading good books develops in us the ability to apprehend intricate structures wrought by an intending intellect; and reading printed volumes keeps us mindful of the miraculous hard fact that thought can be an obstinate real presence in the world. In sum, this answer to the question "Why read books?," which is pretty nearly the same as an answer to the question "Why become educated?," is: so that the world outside and your life within may gather well-defined significance.