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Deep Reading

Jane Thompkins

This essay is the last chapter of a book I recently completed, Reading through the Night, that describes my discovery that reading can become a path to self-knowledge. Someone I hardly knew gave me Paul Theroux's memoir of his 30-year friendship with V.S. Naipaul, Sir Vidia's Shadow, a book that so captivated me that I embarked on a long course of reading in order to understand my attraction to it. The reading included mainly books by Naipaul and Theroux, but other books as well. As an English professor, I had read all my life, and after coming down with a chronic illness, I read to entertain myself and to make time go by. This time what I was looking for was neither entertainment nor, primarily, knowledge about the text, but rather the answer to a question about myself. The book records the discoveries I made about myself in looking for that answer, and the following remarks form a conclusion to the journey.

I was at the eye doctor's having my corneas photographed. I'd had a thin layer of cells removed from each cornea and replaced by a layer of cells from someone else's cornea; the operations had taken place a year apart. Together, the operations had restored my eyesight, which had deteriorated to the point where I could no longer read the newspaper, many of the books I opened, street signs, the instructions on medicine bottles, or restaurant menus. Twice a year I'd go to have the results of these operations checked by a specialist at the Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan. That day I'd been seen by a technician named Dennis, who did the same tests every time: the barn at the end of the road, the rows of letters I had so much trouble making out—the letters getting smaller and smaller until I couldn't see them anymore; it was like taking a test over and over until you failed. Then the eye-drops to dilate my eyes—three drops in each eye—then the waiting area for ten or fifteen minutes, then the photographs.

The photographs were taken by a technician named Susan whose hair had been died red with a touch of magenta. Long and long she looked into my eyes, adjusting the lenses through which she gazed, moving them forward and back, turning knobs, turning her attention now and then to an image of one of my eyes on a screen, then back to the real thing. Deeper and deeper she gazed until finally I felt something move out of me on either side and behind me, a presence, a faint feeling in the air; a door had opened on the inside and this presence had issued forth. It came to me then: the eyes are the windows of the soul. So it was in this tiny, dark room, its door open to the hall, with Susan staring into my pupils, adjusting her lenses over and over to get the right distance, the right exposure, that I felt the existence of my soul for the first time as something palpable and real; its hour had come, the door had opened, it was there. Susan had looked so deeply that the soul had had to step forward and be acknowledged, had had to spread out behind me and on either side, alive, and in attendance.

Back to the waiting area. Time to see the specialist herself, Dr. S. I think of Dr. S. as "the princess" because her manner is so refined and because everything about her is beautiful—her facial features, blond hair, legs encased in sheer black stockings and her feet in black high heels. Poised, imperial, and demure, each time *she* would look through the lenses at my corneas, first one, then the other, she would pronounce, with her princess's elocution, the word "beautiful," her intonation implying that she had looked on something entirely out of the ordinary, almost holy. In fact, she was commenting on the skill of the surgeon

who had performed the transplant.

On this occasion, having felt the existence of my soul for the first time, I decided, while waiting for my audience with Dr. S., to mention my epiphany in the form of a question: had she ever, while gazing into someone's eyes, seen their soul? I reasoned that, even if, as was likely, she wouldn't know what I was talking about, the idea might plant a seed in her mind and one day, looking into a patient's eyes, suddenly she would get goose bumps and . . . there it would be—a soul. I took my chance, and sure enough, she exchanged smiles with her Fellow, Dr. H., a budding corneal specialist there to learn at Dr. S's side; they looked knowingly at one another then back at me, indulgently, as one would look at a child who had said something extremely naive—but forgivable. Patiently, Dr. S. explained that the cornea was the only place in the human body where one could actually see blood vessels, that the spectacle was highly complex, and that to see everything that was going on required all one's attention. The other, she said, meaning the soul, could be inferred from indicators such as body language, a person's manner . . . she let her voice trail off. So that was that. I could feel she wanted to leave. But still, I was content. I had my soul, after all.

What does this story have to do with anything, you may wonder. Specifically, what is the connection between my experience of feeling my soul come out and announce itself on the ophthalmology floor at Weill and the experiences I've had while reading, especially experiences of seeing myself in books I've read and, as a result, learning things I otherwise would not have known? Well, the experiences feel similar, for one thing. The shock of recognition when I saw myself in Theroux for the first time had some of the same quality as the way I felt when my soul emerged from my body. In both cases, it was like seeing a ghost, not that I've ever seen one, but there was the realization that a strange new thing had appeared, something I'd never seen before but which I recognized on sight. And then there was the suddenness of the apparition, the startling awareness that something not visible in the ordinary sense had come to visit me. And, there was the metaphor of looking deeply, the idea that, if one looks deeply enough into something, things will come to the surface that would normally have remained hidden, and the conviction that, on these occasions, the things that come will inevitably, in some way, have to do with oneself. And will also be important. What one sees as a result of looking deeply is not just any old thing; what one sees comes with a flag hanging over it, a banner that reads: "Pay attention! This message is for you!"

Reading in this way, reading so that the ghost rises from the text, pulls at your sleeve and refuses to go away, is not something that happens very often. At least, it didn't used to happen very often to me, though recently I've found out that if I pay a certain kind of attention when I read it's more likely to occur. This kind of deep reading, however, bears very little relation to standard ways of reading, especially highly focused academic ways. Close reading, for example, the method of putting pressure on a line of poetry or a paragraph in a novel so as to force every drop of meaning from it, this kind of reading deeply can be learned, and taught. It is a good way to read and should be a regular part of high school and college English courses. If you don't learn to read like that, you miss too much of what makes literature art. But close reading, as opposed to deep reading, won't necessarily let you see the ghost. In fact, it almost guarantees that you will not,

because it trains the attention on the formal features of the text, and their relation to its meaning, and does not ask how its meaning relates to you.

Deep reading, in the way that I've experienced it lately, doesn't even ask the question—how does this relate to my experience? Rather, the depth is something that arises of its own accord. All at once, you feel gripped, drawn in, as I was by *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, entangled, implicated. The book comes after you and not the other way around. Not that you can't arrive at useful knowledge about yourself, and it, by asking a series of questions, like the questions for discussion that appear at the backs of novels used in reading groups, or the questions an English teacher might ask. If you had been reading *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, for example, the questions would go something like this: have you ever been in a situation like the one Theroux describes when he had lunch with Naipaul at the Connaught? If so, how did it feel? Was your reaction the same as Theroux's or did you refuse to let yourself be treated badly? Why do you think you reacted as you did? My heart always sinks when I come across questions such as these. No doubt one can learn something about oneself by making such conscious comparisons, but the answers may or may not touch on matters of any consequence, because the questions come from without not from within. The kind of reading I'm speaking of here is different. It has an involuntary aspect to it. The sure sign that a piece of writing or a character is speaking to you in a deep way is that you feel something in your body. It's not something you asked yourself a question about, it's not a deduction or an inference, it's a sensation that's simply there; it comes to you, and you either register it or you don't. If you register it, you have a choice whether to pursue it and see where it leads, or to let it go—which can be the wiser choice, since sometimes we're just not ready to go down certain roads. The crucial thing, though, is that you didn't cause the feeling to occur, it simply happened. That's how you know it's important.

If you pick up the option and have the courage to go where you're led, it, the feeling, can show you whole territories in your life that you never knew existed, clear up doubts that have been hanging in your mind for years, lift burdens you've been carrying a long time, let you finally realize why you made that terrible mistake. You become your own therapist. Instead of cinematherapy, bibliotherapy, only not the kind of therapy that makes you feel better right away like the movies on that Women's Entertainment channel program whose logo was a woman in a bathtub with bubbles floating upwards. The kind of reading or viewing that will make you feel good because it's what you need at the moment is fine, but it's more of a short term measure that can work in a pinch than it is like real therapy. Real therapy, the kind I'm speaking about, is the just the opposite: letting a book take you down a path you're afraid to go down because you suspect that what lies at the end is something you don't want to see.

This was how I felt when I began to realize I was taking Theroux's part in those lunches he had with Naipaul, when it dawned on me that, just like him, I had let myself be treated badly and not said anything, that I carried the same shame and resentment he did, and that I had been part of a master-shadow relationship from early on that needed looking into. That is why you need to go down the path. Because, unpleasant as it is, once you've looked the thing in the face, you can begin to deal with it—unravel the knot, heal the wound. If I'm willing to take myself down such a path, I've found, help will often arrive unasked for: someone will say something in passing that sheds light on

my problem, a title will jump out at me in a bookstore, I'll have a conversation with a friend that lets me see my situation in a new way, and it will begin to re-form itself, take on different contours, become explicable, analyzable, dealable with. Eventually, whatever the trouble is will lose its mystery and hence its power. It will become just another facet of your make-up that you recognize, understand, and are no longer scared or controlled by, at least not most of the time. There are no monsters down there, after all. But one has to go there to find that out. Otherwise, they're there, and they're powerful. And you're right, going after them isn't fun, but the benefits are worth it.

Should you want to go, though, how to begin? You can't really do it, as I've said, by asking the right questions, but there is way to get started. What matters is your perceptual apparatus, your ability to notice what's going on inside you when you read. This kind of reading doesn't require any knowledge of literature—a person who didn't go to college can be a lot better at it than a graduate student in English. What it requires is an acquaintance with yourself. It may be that you're not very well acquainted with yourself; it may be that you know more about the NBA play-offs or craft beers or growing orchids than you do about your feelings. It doesn't matter. The standard joke about therapists is, they're always asking how you *feel* about this or that. You tell them something and they say, how did that make you *feel*? When I first went to a therapist I couldn't answer the question. Feel? I didn't really *feel* anything about whatever it was he was asking about. But you can learn to notice how you feel. As the late Yogi Berra is supposed to have said, "You can observe a lot, just by watching." You just have to be willing to pay attention to what comes up, to stay with it, let it be there, and go where it leads. It's a matter of training your attention.

What you notice when you're paying attention depends upon your experience. Everyone knows that after you learn a new word, you start seeing and hearing it everywhere. It was there before, but you didn't notice it because you weren't equipped. Life has to move you into position before you can notice something. You have to be primed. Life moves you through a series of events, situations, experiences such that you start to notice things you couldn't have noticed before. One of Elizabeth Berg's novels has a great epigraph from the movie *Little Miss Sunshine* that goes: "High school, those are your prime suffering years. You don't get better suffering than that." High school, graduate school, marriage, divorce, illness—life changes your perceptual DNA so that you can see things that you couldn't have seen before, not because you're trying to see them but because, after what you've been through, things look different. The level at which you read comes from your life, from what life has done to you, and from how you've responded to that. So, you don't have to worry about whether or not you're reading deeply. If you can, you will. You will read at whatever level you've been permitted to read by your experience. The thing is to take advantage of your position, whatever it happens to be. You're probably positioned a lot better than you think to learn about yourself from your reading. You just have to be willing to notice what a text does to you at the level of sensation and emotion, and then be willing to investigate that. The readiness is all, as Shakespeare said, but you also have to be willing. The willingness usually comes from suffering. The more you suffer, the more willing you will be to look into what might be causing it.

But reading that leads to self-knowledge need not involve suffering. Spiritual or sacred reading offers the possibility of seeing new things about ourselves without the

slightest discomfort. Most of the time it makes me feel light and clear-headed, sometimes joyful, sometimes loved and understood. It only works in small doses, two pages today, a paragraph tomorrow, because it takes time to digest. This kind of reading was a regular part of my life for years before I got sick and for all the years after. Without it, I don't know if I could have survived. Strangely, though, it's not this kind of reading I've needed to write about. It has an impact, but not the kind I feel the need to think through on paper. If I were to write about it at all, it would be part of a different book.

Riding home in the taxi from Weill Cornell on my way down Second Avenue, I was happy. With its Irish bars, the big Catholic church as you get down near 14th Street, the slightly dilapidated, slightly seedy neighborhood seemed soft and receptive to me as I rode by, no longer quite alone. It had been a good day so far. I'd met my soul, my eyes were okay, and I was going home to rest.



Works Cited

Theroux, Paul. *Sir Vidi's Shadow: A Friendship across Five Continents*. New York: Mariner Books, 2014.