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*Beyond Words*

*I cannot remember the books I've read any more than the meals I have eaten; even so, they have made me.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Saved in my iPhone's Notes app among to-do lists, reminders, and other jottings are three passages pasted from Wikipedia, one listing the events that led to the seventeenth century English Civil War, another summarizing the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and a third explaining the religious and political divisions that underlay the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This information serves me as both crib and reproach, refreshing my memory of these subjects while reminding me of how little I retain from my reading about them. Occasionally, I open one of the files and review it, trying to master the players and issues involved and wondering what I take away from nonfiction if not these basic facts. For the *New York Times* columnist Pamela Paul, the slippage begins right after she finishes a book, in this case Walter Isaacson's biography of Benjamin Franklin:

While I read that book I knew not *everything* there was to know about Ben Franklin, but much of it, and I knew the general timeline of the American revolution. Right now, two days later, I probably could not give you the timeline of the American revolution.

It's fashionable to blame this affliction on the internet, that notorious crowder of memories and eroder of attention spans, but what Paul describes predates the computer age. Over fifty

years ago Siegfried Sassoon wrote that “to open almost any book a second time is to be reminded that we had forgotten well-nigh everything that the writer told us.” (My grasp of historical details remains tenuous even after multiple books on an era.) The sixteenth century essayist Michel de Montaigne called his bad memory “the real Achilles heel of his being,” according to his biographer Stefan Zweig. “He forgets the books he has read, has no memory for dates and misplaces the momentous events in his life.” Yet the neuroscientist Charan Ranganath distinguishes between “remembering that an event took place [and] being able to put a date on when it happened.” During the 2024 presidential campaign, when Joe Biden misnamed the Mexican president and couldn’t recall the date of his son Beau’s death, Ranganath wrote that these

lapses might be described as forgetting, but most memory scientists would call this retrieval failure, meaning that the memory is there but we just can’t pull it up when we need it. On the other hand, Forgetting (with a capital F) is when a memory is seemingly lost or gone altogether.

Experts attribute inefficient reading to myriad causes, including inadequate rest, poor nutrition, distraction, failure to choose the right book, or what the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology calls “shallow processing,” where “cognitive processing of a stimulus . . . focuses on its superficial, perceptual characteristics rather than its meaning.” According to one study, e-books exacerbate this problem, yielding poorer comprehension than printed texts. The reader “doesn’t fully get immersed in the narration, or doesn’t fully capture the complex relations in an informative text,” the study’s author, Ladislao Salmerón, writes. Other research has identified a variety of scanning patterns when

people read screens, including one in which the eyes move in an F-shape, making two passes across before following a much narrower path downward, taking in fewer and fewer words.

I envy readers with strong recall, those exam acers, grade getters, and dinner party holders forth, and resent that their gift presents as intelligence while my lack of it feels like stupidity. It's not that I read carelessly—my resolve to remember keeps me as conscientious as fear of failure did in school, and interest alone motivates me to pick up a book in the first place. That and my desire to be well-informed. But if I need help distinguishing the multiple kings and Protectors of England, Scotland, and Ireland, or keeping straight which territory Israel won in which war or which sides Catholics and Protestants took in the dispute over British sovereignty, what makes the time I spend reading about these matters worthwhile? As for what use I would make of this elusive knowledge, self-improvement sounds right, though even that makes my lack of it sound like a deficiency.

Some writing seeps into us without our noticing it, or in a form other than language, useless to a test-taker. "I don't remember the endings of half the novels I've read," the critic Dwight Garner says, "but what I do remember is the way that one character wore her hair, or the way someone cooked something." This happens with fiction and poetry, but can it do justice to nonfiction, particularly history? Nowadays, so many nonfiction writers take a novelistic approach that readers are tempted to focus more on the narrative than the reporting. Even if they forget the facts, they internalize the spirit and sweep of the story. Many well-written works—Macauley's *The History of England*, Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*—inhabit me in this way, but I would need to consult my Notes app in order to converse about the Glorious Revolution or nuclear fission. Fortunately, I'm never called upon to do so, and if I were, interlocutors with more reading at their disposal would fill my silence. But shouldn't I be able to discuss

these matters with myself, or do the fragments and generalities suffice, as with my other memories whose accuracy has faded along with their clarity?

One book that falls into this category is William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. From my reading of it a decade ago, I can't retrieve what James wrote about Christianity or how he treated monotheism, pantheism, theism, or Deism, which suggests that the book left me no better informed than when I began it. But it changed my thinking about religion and faith, so that when I read a news story or hear someone speak on these topics today, my response reaches back to its pages. I like the idea of reading continuing to affect us the way certain experiences or people do even after we have forgotten them. From that initial stimulus, thought proceeds to thought, action to action, until the source, but not the impact, is unrecognizable.

A bit of self-sleuthing turns up a twist to this phenomenon: according to my Amazon purchase history, I ordered a copy of *Varieties of Religious Experience* on July 7, 2012; my computer's hard drive shows a file labeled Faith Outline created two months later. Assuming my usual reading speed, I took about two weeks to make my way through the book, a month to sit with my thoughts, and then began writing an essay reflecting on my own relationship to faith. This explains the prevalence of turned down pages in my copy of James's book, and of quotations from it in my essay (six in twelve pages). Eleven months later, my file history reports, I created a document called Faith Final and made no further changes. My immersion in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, to the point of retyping passages and incorporating James's ideas into my own, hasn't kept me from forgetting it by 2023, as deeply as it permeates my essay and, to this day, me.

My blankness about this book, and therefore about the evolution of my thinking about faith, would make me look at best inarticulate and at worst vapid in a conversation on these topics.



Or maybe that's my faulty belief in the connection between social fluency and intelligence—Ranganath distinguishes between forgetting and “difficulties in the articulation of facts and knowledge.” But according to my upbringing and schooling, being educated means sounding educated, and an inability to communicate what one knows betrays the same muddle in one's mind. Here's a literary variation on the question of whether a falling tree makes a sound if no one hears it: if one acquires knowledge through language, does it remain knowledge if it does not survive in that form? One benefit of English classes—both taking them and, in my case, teaching them to high school students—is that they hold one accountable for reading so that it does not go unclarified or, in the short term at least, forgotten.

School is where we learn that retention pays off. “Always . . . the emphasis is on what you remembered,” the narrator of Sigrid Nunez's novel *The Vulnerables* says of her student days. “Otherwise, how could you write a critique? How could you pass an exam? How could you ever get a degree in literature?” My college roommate, blessed with a flair for science, sympathized with my struggles in an introductory biology course. On the eve of the exam, frustrated by my inability to memorize the structure of a sugar molecule, he advised me to draw one on my palm, predicting that this would help me to pass the course and thereby graduate. Never before or since has the porousness of my mind felt so consequential, the difference between getting ahead and being left behind. The next day, I copied the sketch onto my paper when prompted and passed without daring to check whether my cheating had been the deciding factor. Not that retentiveness always trumps other academic skills such as writing, critical acuity, articulateness, and creativity. Rather, the quick studies among my classmates enjoyed so much success in school (and presumably in compatible professions afterward) that I still grade myself according to that standard.

For all that we associate remembering with learning, we feel

little compunction about forgetting movies, songs, or visual art, perhaps because no one ever tested us on their content. Films that strive for historical accuracy—*Gandhi*, *Schindler's List*, *Apollo 13*, *Gettysburg*—can teach as much as books. The fact that Doris Kearns Goodwin, whose biography *Team of Rivals* inspired Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln*, served as a consultant on the production shows Spielberg's respect for verisimilitude. Songs such as U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday" and The Band's "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" owe some of their stature to their historical perspectives, and the eloquent images in Ken Burns's documentaries often surpass the accompanying narration, leaving us deprived if we forget them. In his article "The Curse of Reading and Forgetting," the journalist Ian Crouch laments his "unsettling ability to forget" the details of a book he had read three years previously, but would he expect to recall the battlefield topography or the configuration of soldiers in Jacques-Louis David's painting "Napoleon Crossing the Alps" after the same amount of time?

The irony of someone as prone to forgetfulness as I am being empowered to grade teenagers on their memories isn't lost on me. Mindful of my shortcomings, I forgo quizzes and try to root out any homework shirkers by their tentativeness during discussion. I doubt that many English teachers believe in reading, even of nonfiction, as a cycle of consumption and recital; rather, they want books to leave an impression, however abstract. "What matters is what you experience while reading," Nunez's narrator says, "the states of feeling that the story evokes, the questions that rise to your mind, rather than the fictional events described." The most famously proficient reader of my college years, the literary critic Harold Bloom, with his reams of memorized poems and command of Shakespeare, struck me as more of a show off than a role model. He obviously adored what he read, but who cares how copiously he preserved it?

Given Bloom's stature, it's worth asking whether the availability

of all this literature gave him an advantage over critics who read as much and thought as penetratingly as he did, but lacked his photographic memory. Poetry seemed to live in him in a way that it does not in someone who can only quote a smattering of lines. Yet this gift strikes me as more quantitative than qualitative, representative of a computer's rather than a brain's processes. Mightn't all of that verbatim language have kept Bloom tied too literally to texts, precluding the intuitions and impressions that occupy most of us after we put down a book? Images, details, and sentences float in and out of our minds, revealing what has been meaningful, as some combination of psychology, personality, and experience dictates what gets elevated to importance or relegated to insignificance. How does one identify what's memorable in a text remembered in full?

It's not Bloom's facility that bothers me so much as its performative aspect. I'm still capable of approaching reading as way to impress people, though this feels like an outdated reflex gradually giving way to purer motives. In *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, the philosopher Alvin Plantinga writes of "a natural instinctive human tendency" toward faith, and the same could be said to apply to our appetite for education, regardless of whether we share our gains or keep them to ourselves. Like many readers, I resist books that look too esoteric to invest time in; with no foreseeable opportunity to draw upon a subject, what's the use in knowing it? Then, as with a recent *New Yorker* article on dog shows, a first paragraph tempts me in, turning reading into a self-contained pleasure and expansion of awareness that requires no more from me than a walk in the woods.

I used to think that I read the way Elmore Leonard advised writers to write, leaving out the boring parts. But not even interest is enough to fix information in my mind, as evidenced by my gaps on British history and the Middle East. Recently, my stepdaughter moved to South Lake Tahoe, California, not far from the site of the

doomed Donner Party encampment in 1846. I mentioned to her my enjoyment of two nonfiction books on this subject, but quickly realized that my conversance with it amounted to little more than one could glean from Wikipedia. My immersion in the details of the tragedy survives largely in non-verbal form, imagined rather than recorded in words: the specter of being lost in a blizzard in the Sierras, starving in a cave, watching a loved one perish and turned into food for survival, all conjured from the same sentences that otherwise left me vague about the expedition. Of the dozens of books that he reads each year as a reviewer for the *New York Times*, Garner says, “What I remember is the humanity.”

The images that I retain of the Donners, as vivid today as when they first materialized, suit a creative writer better than a historian. That two occupations could take an equal interest in a text and process it so differently points to the need for a broader definition of learning than the one typically applied in the classroom, which demands hard evidence for what we have absorbed. This confirms what I observe as a teacher: that retention varies more by temperament than aptitude. For many students, the problem lies with a patchy attention span, bane of both my school years and my adult reading, driving my quest to recover not just what I forgot, but overlooked, tuned out, lost. Crouch writes, “there are times when I notice my own distraction while reading, and can, in a way, feel myself forgetting.” Such lapses send me back over the passage until the words stick. And still I forget.

In his 2023 *New York Times* obituary of the cognitive psychologist Endel Tulving, Clay Risen describes Tulving’s “taxonomy of memory types”:

He started with two: procedural memory, which is largely unconscious and involves things like how to walk or ride a bicycle, and declarative memory, which is conscious and discrete. . . . But then he

further divided declarative memory into two more types: semantic, meaning specific facts about the world, like where France is and who George Washington was, and episodic, meaning personal memories of past experiences.

If one classifies reading alongside other activities such as parenting or travel (“You live several lives while reading,” William Styron wrote), then it could be said to involve both semantic and episodic memory. When I finish a history book, my semantic memory of “specific facts about the world” is different from my episodic or personal memory of where I was, how I felt, my enjoyment of the story and identification with the characters, the tactile pleasure of the book in my hands. Even if my semantic memory of a book fails me, my episodic memory might make up for the loss.

Risen describes an experiment that Tulving conducted in 1993: “As subjects performed a variety of recall tasks, he was able to see different parts of the brain light up—one set of areas for semantic memory, another for episodic.” If one of those tasks had targeted a recently completed book, would he have seen both types of memory at work? A 2013 study published in the journal *Brain Connectivity* analyzed the brain activity of subjects while they were reading a novel. Researchers hypothesized “that if something as simple as a book can leave the impression that one’s life has been changed, then perhaps it is powerful enough to cause changes in brain function and structure.” They found short-term evidence of this connection, leading them to posit a long-term impact in which reading causes “neural activity that is associated with bodily sensations,” as, for example, “when the act of reading a novel places the reader in the body of the protagonist.” This hypothesis explains why my identification with the Donner Party persists long after the “learned facts” have faded.

According to his biographer Blake Bailey, when Philip Roth

retired from writing in his late seventies, he stopped reading as well. In practical terms, he no longer needed to research his novels or keep up with his contemporaries' work, professional motives that may have diminished his enjoyment. For a while, Bailey reports, Roth filled his time watching TV. "Eventually, though, he had to get back to [reading], because he went on living and the days only got longer." When he does resume, he sounds refreshed, telling a friend, "I can't say I retain things as I once did, but while I'm at it it provides deep pleasure." However transitory this effect felt to Roth, it's unlikely to have ended there, especially given that the books Bailey mentions him choosing are all works of history. I doubt I'm alone in returning to this genre as much for its vicarious experience as its instruction or style.

Reading works in two ways, rewarding our attention in the moment and transmitting information by factual or fictional means. Forgetting the information would appear to negate it, unless it survives through a faculty other than memory. Often the most meaningful part of what we take in through words doesn't manifest itself in that form (one recent study involving brain scanning demonstrates that we don't necessarily use language to think). Reading changes us, though we can't always say when, how, or even if this occurs. The mind selects what it preserves based on our interest, focus, and the nature of our memory, but also for its own inscrutable purposes, which have as much to do with character as erudition. The more I learn about the ramifications of this process, the less it looks like a matter of keeping content intact.