

Incarnate Reading: A Cerebralist, Cows, Cannibals and Back Again

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I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I may even be said to possess a mind.

— Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

1. CEREBRALISM

$F=ma$ — bowling, baseball, car accidents, and so on: the simple requisite of power, the proportional combination of mass and acceleration to create an equivalent amount of force, is an ordinary part of life. It presupposes matter and requires that matter have character (mass) and movement (acceleration) that are proportionate to the influence (force) it can inflict upon something else. Take walking on a sidewalk. If something has the ability to change my body's course, to move me from the pavement I am walking on to the grass on my right, then this thing needs to exist in a physical and substantial kind of way to change the direction of my mass (which is bound by inertia to keep moving forward).¹ Any rugby fan surely knows this. The laws of physics are on grand, embodied display at any rugby match — none more graphic than the “engage” command of a scrum — and many, many other places too. Obviously.

When it comes to understanding the human mind, William James is not far from these basic, physical observations in *The Principles of Psychology*. He begins that text by describing the “Scope of Psychology” as “cerebralist,” orienting the reader to his physiological approach to the life of the mind.² (His training and teaching at Harvard, of course, began in medical school, focused on anatomy and physiology.) In the opening footnote of the *Principles*, James even invites us to play along. He writes:

Nothing is easier than to familiarize oneself with the mammalian brain. Get a sheep's head, a small saw, chisel, scalpel and forceps (all three can best be had from a surgical instrument maker), and unravel its parts either by the aid of a human dissecting book, such as Holden's *Manual of Anatomy*, or by the specific direction *ad hoc* given in such books as Foster and Langley's *Practical Physiology* (Macmillan) or Morrell's *Comparative Anatomy and Dissection of Mammalia* (Longmans).³

James has a deeply embodied understanding of the mind as flesh. For James, the mind is not just a conceptual object; it is also a perceptual one, and a carnal percept at that. This is not to suggest that James limits psychology exclusively to the flesh of the brain organ. But his radical empiricism does begin with it. In the early chapters of his *Principles*, James's theory of mind is primarily, if not exclusively, material. In chapter four, on habit, James describes the mind using the word “plastic.” By the word “mind” James is referring to the brain's flesh, or nervous tissue, functioning according to principles more akin to physics than psychology, especially in the aspect of the brain tissue's *plasticity*, which James describes as “the possession of structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at

once.”⁴ James elaborates on his own description in the following quotation, bringing us to the physical matter at hand. He writes:

Organic matter, especially nervous tissue, seems endowed with a very extraordinary degree of plasticity of this sort; so that we may without hesitation lay down as our first proposition the following, *that the phenomena of habit in living bodies are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed*. But this philosophy of habit is thus, in the first instance, a chapter in physics rather than in physiology or psychology.⁵

In modern neurophysiology, brain plasticity — the unlikely progeny of James’s speculations, built on his rather unsophisticated (at least by present standards) psychological experiments — has been observed during head trauma. In the resultant behavior, called “brain modularity,” the brain organ shows a tremendous plasticity in conserving certain essential functions while giving up others regardless of the side or area of the brain affected.

Based upon these neurological, Jamesian observations of physical composition and potential, I begin to form the question that frames the driving concern of this essay. For myself: *what could bend the plastic mind?* Newtonian physics, rugby, James’s theory of mind and philosophy of habit, reliable common sense: all this and so much more show us that a feather cannot, under ordinary circumstances, bend a steel rod. It follows then to say that only bodies that possess the ability to exert a force proportionate to the bodies they can ultimately influence can potentially or actually make them bend, change, or contort.

What, then, are we to do about Michel Foucault, who said the following (in an interview with the Italian Marxist, Duccio Trombadori) about writing books: “I write a book only because I still don’t know what to think about this thing I want to think about, so that book *transforms me* and transforms what I think.”⁶ Foucault is not alone as a writer. Books have had similar, if not the exact same, effect on readers too — including, for better and for worse, this reader of Foucault who is reading what he wrote to you. There is no need to document specific examples: from Newton’s *Principia* and Darwin’s *Origin of Species* to the King James Bible: these books, and millions more, have changed the way people think — from their writers to their readers. On a grander scale, the books I mentioned, and countless others, have played an irreplaceable part in changing the course of human history. From writing to reading, from individual to collective potential for transformation, these events all point to the singularly *educational* import of this emerging question. While this essay will focus on the particular domain of reading, it is important to note that this focus is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. However, the transformative potential we find in reading is, perhaps, the most quintessentially educational aspect of books: books we read have the strange ability to change our minds and shape our thoughts — hence their *educational* efficacy and relevance, in nearly every documented sense of the word “education.”

With this educational concern in mind, the question rearticulates and crystalizes itself: how could it be that a book could affect and thereby constitute our mind’s life — our thoughts, desires, memories, beliefs, and psychological life in general — in a way not unlike the plasticity of the habits of mind when the brain is subjected to head trauma?

It is, of course, well known that books can literally cause head trauma. We call them headaches. But, more seriously: does this material and physical encounter among books and eyes and nerves and mind and so much more meet even the simplest concrete requirements of physiology and physics? Or, are they exempt somehow from making any *physical* sense to us in terms of embodiment and force? Does philosophy skip physiology and physics? Where did materialism go?

The claims embedded in asking these perhaps unfair questions is related to the international enthusiasm today in what some are calling the New Materialism: for instance, the “Object Oriented Ontology” movement in philosophy, begun by Graham Harman and also well executed by Tim Morton’s work in ecology, and the critique of ideology in the work of Slavoj Žižek. In both cases there is a push to find a “ground” — a material and ideological ground — in this virtual, digitized age. The age when things like “globalism,” “capitalism,” “global capitalism,” or Michael Jackson’s metaphysical claim “We are the world...,” or the “happiness” of a McDonalds “Happy Meal” all become accountable to reality in the same way that my feet, socks, and toilet are.⁷ These ideas are at least kin to what James would call my “sentiment of rationality” in this essay. I only mention them here to offer a way to relate to the timbre of the emerging question as not only explicitly educational in nature, but as relevant elsewhere too. This aside shows parallel contemporary theoretical concerns in philosophy, cultural studies, and beyond.

Back to James.

Following James’s trajectory of interests — from anatomy and physiology to philosophy (and later to religion) — I think the physical question I am trying to ask about the educational potential of books is not only a query for natural or so-called “social” science: there is also a philosophical question driven, as it were, by the educational event of reading.

My question repeats itself again: if it seems rather obvious that when another present force lacks the possibility of possessing and exerting a proportionate amount of force over my own body, I remain unaffected by that force, then how is it that when I read these objects that seem to be nothing but ink and paper, grammar, and (mostly) dead authors, that I, like Foucault, find myself so affected and even transformed, again and again, by reading them? And again: *how can a book change someone’s life — if we begin to locate that life through the physique and physics of the body?*

Here we find something like Louis Althusser’s *interpellation*, subjection via language.⁸ But there is a more ancient tradition of embodied language, which, unlike Althusser’s narrativist contention that the subject comes into being through language, makes theological claims like this one: *In principio erat verbum* — In the beginning was the Word.⁹

2. Cows

This *Word* is a mythic word, a unity of *mythos* and *logos*: the condition for the possibility of *poesis* — *mythopoesis*. But this is not my interest or concern in this essay. I am only interested in the cerebralist, physical question of the Incarnation. This Word is also incarnate, made flesh, and forced through this flesh into a very

particular form of life that is not simply alive, but, paradoxically, must die — and die a rather violent, graphic death — to live.

At the heart of the preservation of this mythology is the folklore of *praxis*: specifically, the ancient cultural practice of receiving and consuming human flesh found in pagan rituals such as the chimpanzee's martial triumph-ritual of consuming their battlefield victims, Aztec human sacrifices in pre-Columbian Tenochtitlan, and any Eastern Orthodox or Catholic eucharistic liturgy. While all these traditions have different folkloric dimensions of "god-eating," they share a particularly pagan expression, "body-eating," embedded in different forms and degrees of cannibalism. The sacrifice and consumption of human flesh communicates the same truth we find in moving bodies: lacking a particularly embodied way of being, a way that is as close to my biography — the constitutive life-story of the self — as possible, I am immune to a force capable of serious change and transformation.¹⁰ Only a person sacrificed and consumed has the magnitude to be able to move another person.¹¹

Eating the human body in these traditions is not to desecrate it; quite the contrary, it is *homo sacer*, sacred man (an objectified sense of the subject that shares company with, but also extends far beyond, Giorgio Agamben's juridical historico-political interpretation borrowed from the *Political Theology* of Carl Schmitt).¹² And from these death rituals we find a striking possibility for the metaphysics of a text that does not take its physicality for granted: what a text must offer in order to be and exist, in order to wield the force necessary to change our minds and our lives.

This possibility is not only anthropological and metaphysical speculation; it is also historical and literary. Much like the modern transformation of the human person observed in the genealogies of Foucault and Charles Taylor, most clearly noted in *The Order of Things* and *A Secular Age*, respectively, we find that the modern version of a human person comes with a remarkably different literary sensibility than the one we presently possess.¹³

As I noted in response to Kevin Gary's essay on reading:¹⁴ M.T. Clanchy notes, "Traditional monastic reading in particular bore little relation to a modern literate's approach to a book. *Lectio* was more a process of rumination than reading, directed towards savouring the divine wisdom within a book rather than finding new ideas or novel information."¹⁵ Clanchy goes on by quoting Anselm's *Meditation on Human Redemption* where Anselm invites his reader to: "Taste the goodness of your redeemer ... chew the honeycomb of his words, suck their flavor which is sweeter than honey, swallow their wholesome sweetness. Chew by thinking, suck by understanding, swallow by loving and rejoicing."¹⁶

In these sensual passages, Anselm continues the long tradition of culinary allusions to reading and exegesis that go back at least as far as the Babylonian exile of the Hebrews where the prophet Ezekiel testifies: "He said to me 'Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving to you.' Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth."¹⁷

This sense of literacy is not only a historical phenomenon among theistic religions. Hardly a practicing chimpanzee, Catholic, or Aztec, and not remotely

Judeo-Christian or theistic in his sympathies, Friedrich Nietzsche shares the same culinary sense of literacy. His quintessentially critical sense of the matter recalls Emerson's assessment of American reading in *Self-Reliance*: "Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic." But for Nietzsche the culinary element still remains.

In the introduction to *The Genealogy of Morals* where Nietzsche instructs his reader on how to read his writing — especially his aphorisms — he says the following:

An aphorism, properly stamped and molded, has not been "deciphered" when it has simply been read; rather, one has then to begin its *exegesis*, for which is required an art of exegesis ... To be sure, one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an *art* in this way, something that has been unlearned most thoroughly nowadays — and therefore it will be some time before my writings are "readable" — something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case *not* a "modern man": *rumination*.¹⁸

Nietzsche's most direct words on writing — in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "On Reading and Writing" — are also quite carnal, adding to his instructions on reading: "Of all that is written I love what a man has written with his blood. Write in blood, and you will experience that blood in spirit."¹⁹

Building on these religious, culinary, and even somewhat gory approaches to reading, we now turn our attention more closely to the thing in question: the book and mind and more. A physical, psychological collision.

3. CANNIBALS

While I find the literary sensibilities of Anselm, Ezekiel, and Nietzsche to be effective descriptions of reading — leading to far richer notions of literacy than the conventional idea that reading and writing and texts themselves are disembodied and purely instrumental objects — I also suspect that these authors do not go quite far enough in their consideration of the *matter* at hand. To varying degrees, they fall short of the morbid homicide — and deicide — of primates, Aztecs, Orthodox and Catholics, sharing a common limit in their herbivore exclusivity. I cannot overstate the incisive Nietzschean insight on the need to ruminate, to chew and masticate and dwell. But it is also instructive to think of what one is chewing on: what is the object of rumination? The answer lies in Zarathustra's thirst for blood. It is not enough to eat *like* a cow, to consume grasses and forage; it is not enough to ruminate as if the material body is only a vegetable, incapable of bleeding. The lives and bodies at stake have been sufficiently distanced and made *unlike* our own bodies of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids. Since the flesh of books is not incarnate, we are incapable of being moved by them. Their bloodless, vegetarian embodiment cannot physically wield a force that is proportionate to bend and change the plastic mind and self.

Again: vegetable texts do not threaten us for obvious reasons: the flesh of plants is radically different from the flesh of animals. This difference brings different risks, dangers, and possibilities. If not careful, we could be feeding on our very own kind — even upon ourselves! (You may recall the perverse scene where Hannibal Lecter feeds his victim the victim's own brain.) When eating a cut of meat we do not quite recognize, we might become nervous, and for good reason. (Another side story: this reminds me of an international student I taught who, when shown two prize

Clydesdale horses at a local farm in rural Indiana, became quite excited and asked, “Are those for eating?”) This is a risk — the risk of cannibalizing oneself — that is entirely absent from eating salad greens, hay, or field grass. The flesh of animals resembles human flesh because human flesh is itself animal flesh; and to consume flesh presupposes the *sacrifice* of flesh, an iconic offering: an act of donation that is phenomenologically available to be received as more than an idol or a dead mirror of the subject; an offering that has life to give from itself.²⁰

What these provocative traditions and theories of reading miss is the Incarnation, the Word that becomes flesh, predicting and presupposing the death of its author: the death of God. It is not enough, then, to “bodyread” (as Madeline Grumet aptly puts it in *Bitter Milk*, a book on women and teaching). We need an apophatic phenomenology of *bodyeating*: where the folkloric event of reading is denied and rejected as anything less than the consumption of flesh not unlike our own, that therefore has the force required to change and even transform us because of its embodiment as flesh; possessing the physical, psychological, and phenomenological requirements to influence our plastic mind and the flux of consciousness.²¹

Here we find the disturbing, phenomenological description of incarnate reading, text as flesh: the recovery of the descriptive memory of a reality we perhaps have never quite admitted to before: cannibalizing books, eating them as they are. This makes their well-known and widely documented educational effects recognizable, and asserts the phenomenological structure and rationale for their fleshliness and physical force.

I do not mean to make literacy into some violent, masochistic, or anti-vegetarian practice. After all: these are not normative or prescriptive claims, only descriptive ones. Plus, I suspect that moralistic critiques against this idea would primarily be ways of coping with the traumatic fact that we already are, have been, and always will be bodyeaters in this sense. Even if we all became strict practicing vegans: when the effects of existential transformation through reading happen, we enter into an inevitable, sacrificial offering (as opposed to a mere “exchange”) that, like the consumption of animal flesh, cannot be sterilized from its phenomenological reality by simply changing the narrative, the words that mask the real. Even when we call it “poultry,” we cannot escape the phenomenological reality: we are still consuming a bloody sacrifice of an objectified (and delicious) *homo sacer* — the chicken, our animal kin given to us as food: the sacrificial victim who dies so that we may have life. In the very same way, the fact that reading and writing have been gentrified into polite, instrumental objects — mere instruments for the production of learning — does not change their phenomenological reality. And in this reality we find the literal educational subject matter at stake.

If this imagery sounds too extreme or melodramatic, this might console us: the consumption of text has been widely acknowledged, from Jacques Lacan to Jacques Derrida, as a form of language-violence and author-death. If these theories tell us anything it is that *something* — a thing — must be happening when events of literacy take place, and physics and common sense dictate that that *something*, the offered

gift, must be physically proportionate to its victim if it is to be capable of producing the sort of effects that are well known by those of us, the victims, who read and write books, and feed those books to our pupils. Again, this is not an encouragement for bellicosity or gore, nor is it a mockery of suffering or the sacrifice of the offering. It is simply a reminder that we have *already* embarked on an embodied, phenomenological journey of life and death, plagued by the invisible vertigo experience Ellison describes in the epigraph of this essay and prologue to his novel *Invisible Man* — anchored in the “man of flesh and bone,” Miguel de Unamuno’s “*hombre de carne y hueso*.”²²

The contrast this weighty, incarnate anchor provides against the unanchored “common sense” of reading and writing taught in schools nowadays becomes a question of whether books are simply things to “learn,” provided that we chew or study long enough in order to extract knowledge and test answers and proper funding, or, more radically, whether the actuality and potentiality of reading and writing is an erotic death ritual — an occasion of “erotic study” — in which my body, mind, and heart are at stake in the looming, present offering of an author who has died, or will soon die, so that I and those who read her may live and be changed.

4. BACK AGAIN

We return to William James, *in media res*, as he delivers the Ingersoll Lecture for 1897–1898 at Harvard. His title is *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine*. Nothing has changed since the publication of his *Principles* eight years earlier. James is still a cerebralist. However, in this lecture he reveals the radical potential within his cerebralist approach, its ambitious breath and depth. He begins in earnest with this plea: “I beg you to agree with me to-day in subscribing to the great psycho-physio-logical formula: *Thought is the function of the brain*.”²³ As he continues, James reveals the vast horizon of possibility for his interests and ours: “The question is, then, does this doctrine [the doctrine that thought is the function of the brain] logically compel us to disbelieve in immortality?” (*HI*, 20). James’s answer, in brief, is a resounding, but careful, no. “For my own part, then, so far as logic goes, I am willing that every leaf that ever grew in this world’s forests and rustled in the breeze should become immortal. It is purely a question of fact: are the leaves so, or not?” (*HI*, 55).

This continuous line of cerebralist reasoning, from object to object and thing to thing — this concrete journey that takes us from nervous tissue to habits; from material books to writing and reading them with the possibility of transformation; from the brain to thought and consciousness to the possibility of immortality — this is the phenomenological pathway that can voice a reply to the question of what the event of reading might be and who we might become because of it. First and foremost, it requires flesh: an incarnate sensibility and order, both in methodological orientation and approach as well as in actual descriptive content. In the end, it is not as direct as it seems. Newtonian physics does not apply directly to the electrical nervous circuitry of the brain. Things are more complex. The point here, however, is not to provide a literalist oversimplification of reading, but to consider its process and function in a way that begins with matter but leads beyond the confines of

physiology and physics — in exactly the same way James-the-cerebralist arrives to the point of defending the potential for immortality, and the reality and worth of religious experience in general.

Also relevant to this year's volume of *Philosophy of Education* is its genuinely interdisciplinary character. James verifies this thoroughly. Before he begins his lecture he notes that the question of human immortality — a question he considers to be “one of the great spiritual needs of man” — cannot be reserved to a single field or discipline (*HI*, 12). Whether one finds James's argument for immortality to be fundamental or forgettable, there is little doubt that most of us here take the question of education to be of similar import and gravity. We might take his advice, then, as we conclude this consideration of something like the *sine qua non* of all the academic disciplines: reading.

Orators must take their turn, and prophets; but narrow specialists as well. Theologians of every creed, metaphysicians, anthropologists, and psychologists must alternate with biologists and physicists and psychical researchers, — even with mathematicians. If any one of them presents a grain of truth, seen from his point of view, that will remain and accrete with truths brought by the others, his will have been a good appointment. (*HI*, 12)

In that Jamesian spirit, I leave this description unfinished, waiting for others to have their say on the matter. Provided that what is said is fixed on the *matter*, no more and no less.

1. One might object right away by citing what appear to be rather non-physical examples like a gust of wind or a tornado; however, as we will see, what I am interested in this sense of the word “physical” is not primarily the embodied sense of the term, but, instead how that embodiment points to its relationship to physics through force, clearly in operation in gusts of wind, tornadoes, and other related examples. Plus, any physicist would object saying that the wind is moving air molecules. Magnetism and gravity are also, strictly speaking, physical in this way.

2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Mayard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 68.

5. *Ibid.*, 68–69 (emphasis in original).

6. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext[e], 1991), 27.

7. This passage makes direct reference to Žižek's famous interpretation of French, English, and German toilet designs as being based in ideology and of Timothy Morton's use of Michael Jackson's song “We Are the World” as a metaphysical marker of sorts, and their mutual critique of the ethereal specters of global capitalism.

8. See Louis Althusser, *Essays in Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1984).

9. John 1:1.

10. This is not a purely figurative sort of immunity. Prion diseases, like Alzheimers and mad cow disease, cannot be transmitted through a virus or generics: only through the physical *consumption* of the prion protein.

11. This does not preclude a *human* person.

12. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

13. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
14. See Kevin Gary, "Liberal Education and Reading for Meaning"; and Samuel D. Rocha, "Reading, Meaning, and Being," both in *Philosophy of Education 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011).
15. M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 269.
16. Ibid.
17. Ezekiel 3:3.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 458–459 (emphasis in original).
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 40.
20. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7.
21. Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 132.
22. See Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (quoted in the epigraph) and Miguel de Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life* and *Amor y Pedagogia* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).
23. William James, *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine*, (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1917), 20. This work will be cited in the text as *HI* for all subsequent references.