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## *X-ricing a Book*

Every book has a skeleton hidden between its covers. Your job as an analytical reader is to find it.

A book comes to you with flesh on its bare bones and clothes over its flesh. It is all dressed up. You do not have to undress it or tear the flesh off its limbs to get at the firm structure that underlies the soft surface. But you must read the book with X-ray eyes, for it is an essential part of your apprehension of any book to grasp its structure.

Recognition of the need to see the structure of a book leads to the discovery of the second and third rules for reading any book. We say "any book." These rules apply to poetry as well as to science, and to any kind of expository work. Their application will be different, of course, according to the kind of book they are used on. The unity of a novel is not the same as the unity of a treatise on politics; nor are the parts of the same sort, or ordered in the same way. But every book without exception that is worth reading at all has a unity and an organization of parts. A book that did not would be a mess. It would be relatively unreadable, as bad books actually are.

We will state these two rules as simply as possible. Then we will explain and illustrate them.

The second rule of analytical reading can be expressed as follows: RULE 2. STATE THE UNITY OF THE WHOLE BOOK IN A SINGLE SENTENCE, OR AT MOST A FEW SENTENCES (A SHORT PARAGRAPH).

## HOW TO READ A BOOK

This means that you must say what the whole book is about as briefly as possible. To say what the whole book is about is not the same as saying what kind of book it is. (That was covered by Rule 1.) The word "about" may be misleading here. In one sense, a book is *about* a certain type of subject matter, which it treats in a certain way. If you know this, you know what *kind* of book it is. But there is another, more colloquial sense of "about." We ask a person what he is about, what he is up to. So we can wonder what an author is up to, what he is trying to do. To find out what a book is about in this sense is to discover its *theme* or main *point*.

A book is a work of art. (Again, we want to warn you against too narrow a conception of "art." We do not mean, or we do not only mean, "fine art" here. A book is the product of someone who has a certain skill in making. He is a maker of books and he has made one here for our benefit.) In proportion as it is good, as a book and as a work of art, it has a more nearly perfect, a more pervasive unity. This is true of music and paintings, of novels and plays; it is no less true of books that convey knowledge.

But it is not enough to acknowledge this fact vaguely. You must apprehend the unity with definiteness. There is only one way to know that you have succeeded. You must be able to tell yourself or anybody else what the unity is, and in a few words. (If it requires too many words, you have not seen the unity but a multiplicity.) Do not be satisfied with "feeling the unity" that you cannot express. The reader who says, "I know what it is, but I just can't say it," probably does not even fool himself.

The third rule can be expressed as follows: RULE 3. SET FORTH THE MAJOR PARTS OF THE BOOK, AND SHOW HOW THESE ARE ORGANIZED INTO A WHOLE, BY BEING ORDERED TO ONE ANOTHER AND TO THE UNITY OF THE WHOLE.

The reason for this rule should be obvious. If a work of art were absolutely simple, it would, of course, have no parts. But that is never the case. None of the sensible, physical things man knows is simple in this absolute way, nor is any human production. They are all

complex unities. You have not grasped a complex unity if all you know about it is *how it is one*. You must also know *how it is many*, not a many that consists of a lot of separate things, but an organized many. If the parts were not organically related, the whole that they composed would not be one. Strictly speaking, there would be no whole at all but merely a collection.

There is a difference between a heap of bricks, on the one hand, and the single house they can constitute, on the other. There is a difference between a single house and a collection of houses. A book is like a single house. It is a mansion having many rooms, rooms on different levels, of different sizes and shapes, with different outlooks, with different uses. The rooms are independent, in part. Each has its own structure and interior decoration. But they are not absolutely independent and separate. They are connected by doors and arches, by corridors and stairways, by what architects call a "traffic pattern." Because they are connected, the partial function that each performs contributes its share to the usefulness of the whole house. Otherwise the house would not be livable.

The analogy is almost perfect. A good book, like a good house, is an orderly arrangement of parts. Each major part has a certain amount of independence. As we will see, it may have an interior structure of its own, and it may be decorated in a different way from other parts. But it must also be connected with the other parts—that is, related to them functionally—for otherwise it would not contribute its share to the intelligibility of the whole.

As houses are more or less livable, so books are more or less readable. The most readable book is an architectural achievement on the part of the author. The best books are those that have the most intelligible structure. Though they are usually more complex than poorer books, their greater complexity is also a greater simplicity, because their parts are better organized, more unified.

That is one of the reasons why the best books are also the most readable. Lesser works are really more bothersome to read. Yet to read them well—that is, as well as they can be read—you must try



to find some plan in them. They would have been better books if their authors had themselves seen the plan a little more clearly. But if they hang together at all, if they are a complex unity to any degree and not mere collections, there must be a plan and you must find it.

### Of Plots and Plans: Stating the Unity of a Book

Let us return now to the second rule, which requires you to state the unity of a book. A few illustrations of the rule in operation may guide you in putting it into practice.

Let us begin with a famous case. You probably read Homer's *Odyssey* in school. If not, you must know the story of Odysseus, or Ulysses, as the Romans call him, the man who took ten years to return from the siege of Troy only to find his faithful wife Penelope herself besieged by suitors. It is an elaborate story as Homer tells it, full of exciting adventures on land and sea, replete with episodes of all sorts and many complications of plot. But it also has a single unity of action, a main thread of plot that ties everything together.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, insists that this is the mark of *every* good story, novel, or play. To support his point, he shows how the unity of the *Odyssey* can be summarized in a few sentences.

A certain man is absent from home for many years; he is jealously watched by Poseidon, and left desolate. Meanwhile his home is in a wretched plight; suitors are wasting his substance and plotting against his son. At length, tempest-tossed, he himself arrives; he makes certain persons acquainted with him; he attacks the suitors with his own hand, and is himself preserved while he destroys them.

"This," says Aristotle, "is the essence of the plot; the rest is episode."

After you know the plot in this way, and through it the unity of the whole narrative, you can put the parts into their proper places.

You might find it a good exercise to try this with some novels you have read. Try it on some good ones, such as Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Joyce's modern *Ulysses*. The plot of *Tom Jones*, for instance, can be reduced to the familiar formula: Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. That, indeed, is the plot of every romance. To recognize this is to learn what it means to say that there are only a small number of plots in the world. The difference between good and bad stories having the same essential plot lies in what the author does with it, how he dresses up the bare bones.

You do not always have to find out the unity of a book all by yourself. The author often helps you. Sometimes, the title is all you have to read. In the eighteenth century, writers had the habit of composing elaborate titles that told the reader what the whole book was about. Here is a title by Jeremy Collier, an English divine who attacked what he considered to be the obscenity—we would say pornography, perhaps—of Restoration drama much more learnedly than is customary nowadays: *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage, together with the Sense of Antiquity upon this Argument*. You can guess from this that Collier recites many flagrant instances of the abuse of morals and that he supports his protest by quoting texts from those ancients who argued, as Plato did, that the stage corrupts youth, or, as the early Church fathers did, that plays are seductions of the flesh and the devil.

Sometimes the author tells you the unity of his plan in his preface. In this respect, expository books differ radically from fiction. A scientific or philosophical writer has no reason to keep you in suspense. In fact, the less suspense he keeps you in, the more likely you are to sustain the effort of reading his work through. Like a newspaper article, an expository book may summarize itself in its first paragraph.

Do not be too proud to accept the author's help if he proffers it, but do not rely too completely on what he says in the preface, either.

## HOW TO READ A BOOK

The best-laid plans of authors, like those of mice and other men, often go awry. Be guided by the prospectus the author gives you, but always remember that the obligation of finding the unity belongs finally to the reader, as much as the obligation of having one belongs to the writer. You can discharge that obligation honestly only by reading the whole book.

The introductory paragraph of Herodotus' history of the war between the Greeks and the Persians provides an excellent summary of the whole. It runs:

These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud.

That is a good beginning for you as a reader. It tells you succinctly what the whole book is about.

But you had better not stop there. After you have read the nine parts of Herodotus' history through, you will probably find it necessary to elaborate on that statement to do justice to the whole. You might want to mention the Persian kings—Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes; the Greek heroes of the war—primarily Themistocles; and the major events—the crossing of the Hellespont and the decisive battles, notably Thermopylae and Salamis.

All the rest of the fascinating details, with which Herodotus richly prepares you for his climax, can be left out of your summary of the plot. Note, here, that the unity of a history is a single thread of plot, very much as in fiction. So far as unity is concerned, this rule of reading elicits the same kind of answer in history and in fiction.

A few more illustrations may suffice. Let us take a practical book first. The unity of Aristotle's *Ethics* can be stated thus: