

## 9

### The Reading Group

There are five of us. We've been reading memoir together for ten years. We meet only when all of us can make it. Some years, that means only six or seven times. Even so, these meetings often seem to come at the kind of inconvenient moment that lives like ours—the ones eaten up with scheduling—are forever manufacturing. Yet no one wants to give up the group.

It's not the reading itself that holds us together—how many hours have we each sat, eyelids propped open against the unexpected dullness of a famously great book. I don't think it's even the conversation that the book gives rise to. It is, rather, the atmosphere that we occupy while we are meeting that each of us has grown reluctant to do without.

I used to think it was the conversation. Not that the exchange is necessarily one of depth, or originality, or even agreement. To the contrary, disagreement among us, strong and well-argued, is routine; it is, in fact, what we look forward to. Among us, disagreement is a stimulant not a depressant: the opposing view against which your own defense gives you back more of yourself than you had before. Argument in the group leaves us, as George Meredith said good conversation should leave you, feeling refreshed by the opportunity to experience social intercourse as an act of self-expansion.

Really, it's quite remarkable, this ever-recurring demonstration of a thing we all know about—the dynamics of good talk—but only rarely encounter. What is especially remarkable about the group is that it is only *as* a group that we achieve the shared temperament necessary for such conversation. We have all known each other for twenty years and more, in one context or another, and while each of us values the others in the abstract, outside of the group none

of us meet by design. One on one, we are a great example of the near-miss so common among sufficiently like-minded people who should blossom in each other's company but do not. Over the years, each of us has talked books with one of the others, only to emerge from an exchange that all too quickly reaches closure, leaving one or both feeling puzzled or chagrined, even melancholy. But when we come together as a group, some vital commonality in the way we *all* read intervenes to reduce the irritation and discomfort that, one on one, we inevitably inflict on one another.

That very first evening—we were reading Rousseau, I remember—I found Leonard's remarks dipped in that customary acid negativism of his that always puts me on the overheated defensive. As he spoke I found my own as yet unformulated remarks beginning to shrivel in my head. But Claire laughed warmly, and delivered an opinion so intellectually soothing that it made Myra clever, and the discussion took off. When my turn came I had gained the distance necessary to register the merit of a point Leonard had made earlier, and was able to speak amiably to that alone. All evening I watched as this kind of serendipity occurred repeatedly among us, each and every time creating a tone sufficiently free of tension that the conversation knew no closure.

It is this tone that has made us mesh as a group; again and again, it helps shape sentences that set each of our thoughts free, makes them fly out unguarded, secure in the knowledge that even if challenged they will be received. That meshing not only opens us to our own thought, it obligates us to responsiveness. Obligation has made each of us, in our opening presentations, dig deeper. Inevitably, digging deeper gives someone the chance to hit pay dirt. Many is the night that one or more of us has walked in, thinking, "I don't have one damned thing to say about this book," and has ended by delivering one of the more memorable insights of the evening because another of us has connected so strongly with the book in hand that the atmosphere is galvanized; then all are released from the inertness of mind that an absence of engagement imposes. Who connects with what book is always a revelation. We once read George Kennan's memoir, and this is how the session began:

"A civilized and poetic being," said Daniel.

"Weak passions, strong ambitions, and a continual sense of himself in the world," said I.

"A cold warrior riddled with nostalgia," said Myra.

"The Russians are his demonized childhood," said Claire.

“This is the man who has humiliated me my entire life,” said Leonard.

It was Leonard to whom the book belonged that night. His dislike of Kennan—powerful yet tempered—had touched a useful nerve. Leonard is a sixty-year-old gay man, and for him, middle-class liberalism has always been the enemy. When he spoke it was out of strong emotion informed by years of reflection anchored in a crucial piece of identity. His critique opened an unexpected vein in the conversation. None of us had ever before considered Kennan in the light of Leonard’s take; and none of us would ever again see the courtly diplomat as we had before. The evening was a high.

Every book has its poetic respondent among us, the one for whom the book, whatever its shortcomings or eccentricities, delivers an inner clarity that resonates in that part of the expressive self where intelligence serves sensibility. The surprise, as I say, is always supplied by who resonates to whom. (Canetti? Augustine? *You?* Oscar Wilde, for God’s sake!) No one was more surprised than me to find myself stirred on one occasion by Thomas de Quincey, on another by Loren Eiseley—an English drug addict and a Midwestern depressive, both of them men formed in times and places deeply foreign to my own. Yet in each of this unlikely pair I saw a self-created loneliness—neurotic,

stubborn, overriding—that was central to the life. I knew that one down to the ground. These memoirs made me know better something that I already knew (exactly what had happened between Leonard and Kennan). In their presence / clarified.

It is the reading group that has made me realize how very closely the relation we have to books resembles the one we have with people. Myra is one of the smartest readers in the group—and one of the narrowest. It matters not how intimidating the reputation of a book might be, or how well established its author, she is relentless in her resistance to nostalgia or sentimentality, which she perceives as self-deception. “He doesn’t know himself,” is her favorite opening sentence. Yet quite often, there came a book that would receive from her the dispensation we inexplicably extend to those who arouse in us the mystery of temperamental connection.

Daniel and I had both read biographies of H. G. Wells that significantly contradicted, even belied his own account of his life. Our discussion of these discrepancies the night we read Wells’s memoir, *Experiment in Autobiography*, was turning the session into an amused seminar on “truth” in a personal narrative. When Myra’s turn came she amazed us all by stating flatly that it mattered not at all that Wells had

whitewashed his own story. It mattered only that in this memoir we had a profoundly satisfying evocation of an atmosphere of *mind*; this Wells had delivered, so brilliantly and so fully, that it made her yearn for a time when an excellent intelligence could live out a long life informed by an undiminished belief in the inevitable progress of science and socialism.

None of us had ever heard Myra put down her red pencil and recklessly—hedonistically—embrace a book. As she talked, we could see that it was nothing in particular in the Wells memoir that had enraptured her, it wasn't even Wells himself. It was, in some remarkable way, a wholeness of being in the book that had touched the place in her where *she* felt whole. Exactly what we experience in friendship or in love: the connection that returns us to our own expressiveness. As we listened to Myra, everyone in the room seemed to draw a deeper breath. The air brightened visibly. I was reminded of something Randall Jarrell had once written: that it was an atmosphere of reading that we wished to inhabit, one where reading is as elemental as air and light and water.

I think often of Jarrell when the group meets. How real and close to the heart he seems when I am most moved by this live thing that occurs, almost every time, between a book and its one true reader, and by the extraordinary fallout this

vididness gives rise to among the rest of us. It is then that I understand most intensely how devoted humanity is to the act of making literature because it leads to the act of reading.