

INTRODUCTION

ON READING

A PACT WITH THE DEVIL

How does one read properly, that is, ethically?

In an examination of this question, a questioning of the question, there is an obvious link between the terms *how* and *ethically*; both involve choice, and choosing. Whenever a “how” is invoked, the subject has to choose between one or more options. However, for a situation to involve ethics, there must be a choice made in which the singularity making the choice is responsible to and for all the other(s) in that situation: it is this singularity, this particularity, which makes the choice a proper one. There is a crucial difference between the choice in the situation of a “how” and the choice in an “ethical situation.” The choice in “how” involves alternatives which are already laid out before us: hence, the decision made is calculated, calculable, part of a system. In a true ethical situation, the choice is always made in a moment of

blindness: the outcome (and even the situation leading up to it) is unknowable.¹

So is “how to read properly, ethically,” and then, more precisely, “how to read as if each reading is a singular situation,” an impossible question? Or, if not an impossible question—after all, we did ask it—then perhaps a question that can only remain a question, one that cannot be closed off, be completed, and, by extension, be theorized (in the sense of forming a complete theory about it)?

Ethical reading is a conception of reading as a space of (and for) negotiation. The moment of reading is the moment when the “how” and “ethics” collide; one can never read in a vacuum (both the text and the reader have their respective historicities), but in order to read, the reader must be free to respond fully to the text. In this way, we face two contradictory demands: one must read as if for the first time, that is, without any preconceived notions of reading or of the text, but at the same time, it is impossible to read without any prior knowledge of reading—and this makes the situation aporetic. After all, we are born into reading; reading precedes us, and much of reading relies on conventions. But it is precisely in this space that the negotiation and choosing take place. Each decision, and each choice, is temporal, and each instance of reading is a new one—no two readings will be the same. It is within this space, this temporal—and singular—space, that reading can occur as a singularity, and in which a potentially new reading can occur.

If each reading is temporal and hence potentially new, it opens up this question: Is a virginal reading possible? Can one read as if reading for the first time?² This brings into question the status of memory and forgetting with respect to reading. Clearly, memory is part of the process of reading: one must remember the rules of language, and one must also remember what one

has read prior to reading what is in front of one. One must also always keep in mind what is ahead of one. This is especially true when one is reading to unearth the movement of thought in a text, when one is attempting to unveil the different registers in the text: one must speculate what is not-yet-read, one must remember the future, for otherwise, one cannot project how what one is currently reading fits in with respect to the entire text.³ However, in order to open these registers, to allow these different readings to potentially surface, one must also forget what one has read, what one is reading; otherwise, one is merely reiterating what one already knows. At every point of reading that responds to the potentiality of the text, there must be a forgetting that occurs prior to the reading: each time one reads, no reading takes place if one does not forget.

It is precisely the double function of forgetting and memory that results in language being both general and specific simultaneously (and the two never being able to be reconciled). It is only because forgetting is the very basis of language⁴ that there is the possibility that at each reading, a unique reading, a new reading (a reading as if reading had never before occurred) might occur. It is forgetting that allows for the single instance of a new reading, but at the same time, it is memory (of language and, more precisely, grammar and its rules) that allows for reading to take place at all. Hence, every act of reading is when memory and forgetting collide: every act of reading is aporetic, as one has to both remember and forget at the same time. Each time reading occurs, one is not just reading the text for the first time, but also reading for the first time.

It is forgetting that ensures that each reading is potentially a virginal reading: not a first reading in the sense of an original reading, but a first reading in the sense of there never being a second reading, there never being a repeated reading. After all,

is not the hymen another shield, another veil, another blind, one that only appears to be broken, split, ruptured, only to reveal that one is within folds, layers, all of which reveal and unveil and hide at the same time? Like the splitting of the veil in the temple, all that is revealed is that the secret of God remains, an unknown, an unknowable, which can only be sometimes glimpsed.

Of course, the problem with forgetting is that it cannot be willed, determined, decided; it happens to one. In other words, one cannot count on forgetting, call on forgetting; not only does it happen to one, one might not even know, ever know, that forgetting has taken place. And once it has, there is no object to forgetting: the moment one can designate an object that is forgotten, one is back in the structure of memory. In other words, there is no referentiality to forgetting. Hence, one can never actually know of forgetting; it is always beyond the realm of knowledge. And since reading that is not merely a preconditioned hermeneutical decoding is premised on the possibility of forgetting, this suggests that we can never quite know when, or even whether, reading itself occurs.

This suggests that reading can no longer be constituted in the classical tradition of hermeneutics, as an act of deciphering meaning according to a determined set of rules, laws: this would be reading as an act where the reader comes into a convergence, at best, with the text. In fact, reading can no longer be understood as an act, since an act by necessity is governed by the rules of reading. Reading must be thought of as the event of an encounter with an other—an other who is not the other as identified by the reader, but rather an other that remains beyond the cognition of the self. Hence, reading is a prerelational relationality, an encounter with the other without any claims to knowing who or what this other is in the first place; an unconditional relation, and a relation to no fixed object of relation. As such, it is the ethical moment *par excellence*.⁵

Since reading is an event of ethicity, it interdicts any pre-conditioned determination of the encounter. As such, it cannot be conceived as a phenomenal event. This is due to the fact that a phenomenal event is what appears to the senses—a theory of appearances—and is determined by its correspondence to an existing conception; the event is subsumed under the self’s “knowledge.” What the reader encounters may only be encountered before any phenomenon—or at least, the point of encountering is always already beyond the reader’s knowing. Hence, reading occurs as a nonphenomenal event, or, more precisely, as the event that undoes any possible theory of phenomenality. The scene of Saul’s blinding demonstrates this, as it is not a blinding by a phenomenon but rather by the very source of phenomenality itself, which remains invisible, undecipherable, and ultimately unknowable, irreducible to any concept of understanding or reason. Hence, it is the blinding not only of the subject of cognition—Saul—but also of the object of cognition; it is the event of a double blinding, an encounter that is completely beyond cognition, that is unknowable, that is in exception of everything that is known. As such, at every encounter, each reading is an event of full potentiality, where nothing can be known except the fact that it is the event of an encounter.

It is this potentiality that Saul saw when he was blind; it is this potentiality that was embodied in the new name of Paul. However, in order for the movement from Saul to Paul—in order for Saul to become Paul—there is a necessary gap, a space, a blind spot (whether it is three days or three years is irrelevant) in the narrative; it is this gap, this unknown, that opens up the space for the becoming, for the Christian. It is not possible to say what this site of negotiation, this third that lies between the Pharisee Saul and Paul, is. The gesture of imagination, this leap that is required to move from Saul to Paul—a transubstantiated Saul, exactly the

same and slightly different at the same time—is not one that can be defined; it can only be described, narrated (and only after the event). After all, the first time we are made aware of his new name is in Acts 13:9—“Then Saul, whose other name is Paul.” It is not as if Saul had suddenly shed his old self and is now a new being: Paul is his other within his old self, Paul is the becoming Christian of Saul. In other words, Paul is the gap, the space within Saul himself, the site of becoming that is the Christian. All that can be said is, perhaps, what this site of negotiation is not; in this sense, at best, all that can be said is proscriptive. This is precisely because the space of imagination is not an object, but rather, the space itself is what is being imagined: it is the imagination of the possibility of the third, the third that is always in a state of becoming, that allows this transubstantiation to take place.

This space of imagination, this imagination of a space, is what allows for reading to take place. After all, reading is never done, it is constantly becoming.⁶

It was Saul’s positing of the possibility of a space between the Jew and the non-Jew that gives rise to the term *Christian*. It was Saul’s blindness to the fact that one cannot know the will of God—he had to act according to the “voice” that he heard, that only he had heard, and act according to this event, this singularity that cannot be explained—that allowed for the Christian. In order to act, Saul had to read the “voice” in blindness—posit a reading that is ultimately illegitimate and unverifiable. Hence, the question that continues to haunt the work of Paul, the question that cannot be answered, will always be, what did the voice say?

There is an echo of this in the eternal question that haunts the Bible itself: “Did God *really* say you were not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?”⁷ This is the question that is unanswered, and never answerable: after all, no one will know what God said to the woman. Even if we accept the validity of her words, “But

of the tree in the middle of the garden God said, ‘You must not eat it, nor touch it, under pain of death’⁸—and there is no reason to do otherwise—the question of whether this was *really* what God said remains. After all, a prohibition almost always gives rise to a temptation to defy. In this sense, one can question whether it is the serpent that tempted, or whether it was really God who set the scene in the first place. In fact, the serpent is telling the truth when it utters, ‘No! You will not die! God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods knowing good and evil,’⁹ which is precisely what happened.¹⁰ After eating the fruit, ‘the eyes of both of them were opened,’¹¹ the result of which is that Yahweh God acknowledges that ‘man has become like one of us, with his knowledge of good and evil.’¹² In order for woman and man to become like God(s), they had to first turn a blind eye to Yahweh’s order to not eat from that tree.

One might also consider the exchange that is needed in order to obtain the knowledge of good and evil. Yahweh God’s admonition to man is, ‘You may eat indeed of all the trees in the garden. Nevertheless of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat, for on the day you eat of it you shall most surely die.’¹³ In this sense, one can take it that both woman and man consume the fruit in the full knowledge that they are sacrificing their lives in exchange for the ‘knowledge of good and evil’: it is their gift of death that was required in order for them to become ‘like one of us.’¹⁴ More than just the fact that they had to ignore Yahweh God’s command, in order to become like the God(s), they had to listen to the question and decide for themselves: to gain the knowledge of good and evil, they first had to choose. This is a choice that is made in blindness, for they knew not what they were choosing: after all, one can hardly claim that they, before knowing what good and evil were, were making a cognitive choice about good and evil.¹⁵

It is this pact with the serpent—the pact that God and the serpent have in secret—that sets the scene for the woman to know of the fruit: after all, if God created everything and has full knowledge of everything that is to happen, then both the serpent and the question are also of Yahweh's creation.¹⁶ It is this secret pact (even though the serpent is a creation of Yahweh, Yahweh still needs its complicity in this matter: full knowledge does not necessarily equate to full control) that opens the possibility of the woman eating the fruit in the first place. One must not forget that it is she who first ate of the tree; it is she who made the blind choice by positing the possibility that perhaps God didn't *really* mean not to eat from the tree. It is this pact that maintains the possibility of questioning and, more importantly, the possibility that humankind can choose for itself, can have access to the "knowledge of good and evil." It is also the question that ensures that we can continue reading—as knowledge can never totalize—that reading itself can continue.

What this suggests is that a prescriptive answer to the questions (how to read properly, that is, ethically; did (s)he really say that?) is impossible, for every statement would only hold true in a particular moment, a particular situation, a singular moment. After all, at her moment of choosing to eat of the tree, all the woman could do is to posit whether God really said that or not; there is no certainly, only a possibility or a momentary potentiality for it to be true. It is these moments, these singular particularities, that we will listen for (we cannot always see them, for they are hidden somewhere in the text, within the text, with the text). All we can hope to do is to listen out for these moments, these details, for as Jean Baudrillard reminds us, there is no finer parallel universe than that of the detail or the fragment.

Freed from the whole and its transcendent ventriloquism,
the detail inevitably becomes mysterious.

Every particle wrested from the natural world is in itself an immediate subversion of the real and its wholeness. Like the fragment, it only has to be elliptical. It only has to be an exception. Every singular image can be reckoned exceptional. And it puts an end to all the others.¹⁷

It is only in blindness that we can see exceptions; it is only in exceptions that we can see when we are blind. Only through thinking in terms of the peculiar, the particular, the absurd, even, can we perhaps puncture the flattened book, rescue the text, the unread, the unreadable, such that the book can never be read, such that reading can continue.¹⁸ Perhaps to do so, we must first attempt

to wrest the real from the reality principle
 To wrest the image from the representation principle.
 To rediscover the image as point of convergence between
 the light from the object and the light from the gaze.¹⁹

The fragment is precisely where we can find reading as the event of an encounter. For it is only when each encounter is taken as an exception (and, by extension, that exception is the norm) that reading as an ethical event can be begun to be thought. If each encounter with the text is an encounter with a fragment, then no unity can be established; by extension, there cannot be an overarching whole which can establish itself as a rule and hence precondition the event of reading. Hence, each event of reading is a reading of a fragment, each reading is itself a fragment, each event of reading is also an event where reading itself is constituted.

There is much to learn from the proverb, “The devil is in the details”: it is the small things, the fragment, the particular, that prevents any totalizing logic from taking place, from unifying itself, from solidifying itself. Perhaps in this light, or darkness,

there must be an attention to, a reading of, the small, the unnoticed, the little, and a blindness to a large, the whole. In this way, there is a potential for the mysterious and the wonderful to appear, and perhaps we can catch a glimpse of the phantoms that haunt the text. After all, one can only see ghosts with the third eye.

But first, perhaps we must begin to think of what this blindness that we are thinking of is in the first place. And, perhaps more accurately, what this blindness that we are thinking of is not. Is it when we do not see that we are blind, or is it that we are blind when we do not see: is blindness what we do not see, or does blindness shape what we see in the first place? In order to examine the question, how does one read properly, that is, ethically? one is faced with the issue of blindness and what it is one does not see, cannot see. Hence, we have to first examine blindness itself and its relation to reading. Since there is a link between seeing and knowledge (captured perfectly in the phrase “Seeing is believing”), we have to reflect on the relationship between what we can and cannot see, and, more specifically, if what we cannot see is always already part of what we see. This would open the consideration of the possibility of knowing and the very limits of knowledge itself, after which we will read texts that attempt to think reading itself, that attempt to think the possibility of reading. For if we only attempt to speak of—write about—reading without reading anything, we might then just be speak-writing of everything but reading. By attempting to read, perhaps we can begin to meditate on what the text is as such, what the object that we are reading is (if it even is an object), and how we can start to approach it. And since reading is the relationship between the reader and the text, we must then turn our attention to how reading affects the reader; the effects of the text, and reading, on the body, in the body, of the reader. In this way, we might be able

to begin thinking of how both the reader and the text read each other, write onto each other, into each other.

However, we must begin at the beginning, by taking a detour through blindness—and what blindness entails in the first place. After all, if we refuse to acknowledge what we cannot see, refuse to see that we cannot always see, we might remain stumbling around in the dark.