

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR READING BETTER:

Thirteen Ways of Looking at It
[And/Or]
When a Text is an Ecosystem

BY JOHN CAMPION

(Note: After more than 30 years of teaching, I put this together in an attempt to help students read more dynamically and purposefully.)

I a

How you look at it is how you look at it.

Remember that everyone carries prejudices into every situation. Think about how your cultural background, your race, your gender, and your religion affect your reading. Try to pay attention to this and to what is in front of you. But remember also that you are a collaborator in the work's ongoing existence. READING IS AN ART FORM, and art is a co-evolutionary process. Charles Olson implored his readers to learn to see the world out of their own eyes. And to crib Olson a bit further, "Nothing exists without doing it." So take the risk and give yourself permission to make judgments—make it happen.

I b

Remember that the author is looking too.

We can't know what the author intended, but turn the lens around anyway. Consider the author's prejudices and cultural background. How have these shaped the text?

I c

The text has its own way of looking—its own intentionality.

Poe used to say that a great text has a unity of composition—everything fits and reinforces itself. It contains clues about how to read it. Assume that every word counts and is the right word in the right place. What is it saying and how is it saying it, together?

II

Reading is an alchemical art: it makes the work and changes the work.

Matter, mater, meter, muthos—the myths and real ideas created by reading are transcendent and imminent, cosmogonic and local; they come from above and below, the past and the future; they produce and are produced by menses, mensa, and mensura—blood, mind, and measure. The bread your reading is serving up is a result of transmutation.

Ergo: ask what a text is doing, why, how, and to what purpose. How does something you're noticing function in the process? As a maker of history, you owe it to yourself to constantly revise your hypotheses as you go. Collaborate with other makers to make it.

III a

The idea, the image (myth or dreamworld), and the music—altogether—with the augury of reading, make the scene.

Ezra Pound (look at his essays on poetics and read *The Cantos*) spoke about the argument dancing with the images and the music. All of these function together, nothing is wasted, and everything adds to the whole. Look at the text as philosophy or painting or music. Find the Eidos, the idea itself, and discover an art's working logos—the meaning making function, its argument. Every art has logos, even music, through its compositional processes; without this unifying principle, too often art becomes deracinated from the times and culture it lives within.

Joseph Campbell once said that myths are public dreams; dreams are private myths. Myths are essential and vital in the building of socially and psychologically healthy Sanghas (communities) and individuals. No wonder writers pursue this ancient work. In your analysis of reading, see the dream image before you interpret it—but by all means, do interpret it. Read Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* to get going.

Listen well for the beating heart and its pitch, follow the oceanic waves and their measure. Read a work aloud for the music—but remember that music composition is not just for the ears—Pound urged us to think of the musical phrase, not the metronome--it's composed with logospoetic analogues to the word. Music is a record of a way of thinking. And a poet who wants to know about music ought to listen to the ones who really make it. Learn about contemporary composers and how they work. Listen to Gerard Grisey's *Les Espaces Acoustique*. (Poets and composers alike ought to think about all this before they presume to collaborate.) Look for processes in the composition itself; here is your logos. Track down Garcia Lorca's *Theory and Function of the Duende* and follow the canny operations of the irrational.

But no doubt about it as EP said: "There's no short cut through hell." TO READ DEEPLY YOU'LL HAVE TO KNOW A THING OR TWO and go about that quest wisely. Ask someone for a long, good list of books to read, images to observe, and music to listen to. Try this one I made many years ago: <http://ecotropicworks.tripod.com/index-3.html>

III b

The physical text matters.

THE WAY A TEXT IS LAID OUT SHAPES *WHAT IT IS*. Consider the type font, size, and arrangement of text on the page: the typography and the topography: identify its relation to other texts and within the genre of texts: typology. To bring Borges into it: THE TEXT IS A MAP THE SIZE OF THE CONTINENT—that large, and larger. Let's check out Yeats' *Leda and the Swan*:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By his dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
How can anybody, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins, engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

QUESTION: HOW DOES THE COLON IN THE OPENING LINE FUNCTION?

A sudden blow:

Remember *blow* means to strike and to blow out (as with breath). This embodies the poem's creative and destructive linkages, co-terminously. A single word, like a single image, can carry the load.

QUESTION: HOW DOES THE PHYSICAL BREAK IN THE LINES BELOW FUNCTION?

And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,

Notice how the break in the line mirrors the break in the walls of Troy and in Leda's hymen. Can you see the uroborus in the arrangement of *dead* and *Being*? Poetry has the ability to transcend linear time and mere denotative description. Everything is happening now. In the *Mahābhārata*, Krisna permits Arjuna to see the world in this way for a few precious moments. His human limitation does not permit more. What he perceives, and what poetry and what reading poetry is about, IS THE REAL WORLD.

IV

The title sets the boundaries and often reveals the text's system of meaning making.

Think of Hemmingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*. The simile helps locate the story, physically and conceptually. But why does the comparison seem to resist the intelligence—almost completely? How does this relate to the couple in the story who are having the mysterious problem? (Here, putting the reader into a space of uncertainty, of negative

capability to use Keat's phrase, heightens the reading experience and relates to the content itself.) I'll try to shed some light on this later in section **XI**.

V

What you don't know shows the way.

Look up every word you don't know, check its etymological roots, and track any reference with an eye to understanding its use in how a text is being presented.

TO RECONNOITER:

How does Yeats use the title in the poem above? How does it exemplify the poem's intentionality? If you don't know who Leda and the Swan are, you simply can't understand the reach of the poem. The title sets the poem's space and time: ancient Greece during the Trojan War. The fact that the poem tracks the rape of Leda by the god Zeus embodies the violence of the war and sets up the poem's preoccupation with its historical, mythical, and psychological ramifications for *The West*.

VI a

Words, like photons, have both a wave and a particle nature. Watch how this feature can cause the meaning of a text to wobble between states, creating new kinds of meaning as it goes.

Find and read Ernest Fenellosa's masterful essay, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. Then consider how poet/farmer Wendell Berry put it to good use. He presents the radical of a *MAN* and puts beside it the radical of a *WORD*. Together they make a new character: telling the truth (a man standing by his word). THE HOW OF MAKING MEANING PROVIDES THE WHAT OF MAKING IT. English can work like this; Joyce does it with redolent puns.

For now, let's see how Hemmingway makes it simple in *Big Two-Hearted River*:

Nick sat smoking.

Figuratively, the text states that Nick is smoking a cigarette, but literally it says that Nick himself IS smoking, somehow smoldering, internally. How does this function? Perhaps, the very instability of the word *smoking* enables it to work a double shift: describing the external world and revealing an internal one at the same time. Look in **VII a** at the word *blind* from Joyce's *Araby* and see how it fits this mode. Remember, "No ideas but in things," said W.C. Williams. So look at the things in any text—the ideas are there.

(Note that many of the tips listed here could be cross-listed according to category and are techniques deployed with a variety of polyvalent effects. Likewise...

THE TIPS CAN BE INVERTED: YOU'VE GOT A MAP OF WRITING TECHNIQUES HERE TOO.)

VI b

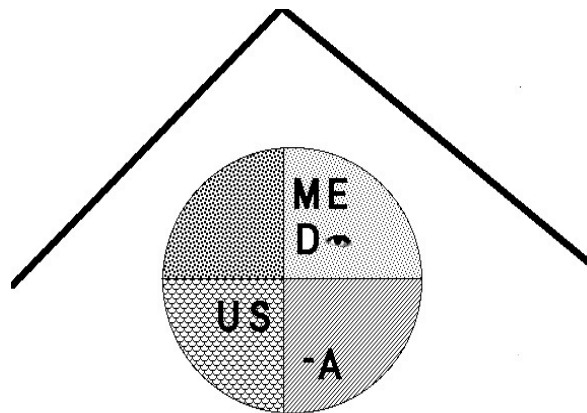
Extended techniques (which by now are commonly trod) provide additional pathways to reach the destination.

These can include wordplay and puns, unusual text placement and/or presentation, text manipulation (like letter or word stretching and enlarging), etceteras. Artists from the 17th century used these techniques. So did those from the Futurist and Dadaist movements.

James Joyce used puns like a metaphysician to crack open words to get to their buried heart. His last novel, *Finnegan's Wake*, presents a recursive portrait of human culture in the West--where action seems to be happening in a continuous present, as apparent opposites like death and life are resolved.

The title itself promises and completes this work of deconstruction and redeployment. *Fin* means END and *again* means to REPEAT SOMETHING; *Wake* is something we do for the dead and it means TO ARISE. It is also something of a CONTINUOUS PRESENT, as the wake of a boat is an ongoing memory of an event. Collectively they imply all the things that Joyce's book intends.

Now take a look at the title of John Campion's third book-length work, **MEDUSA**. Notice how the title is severed into text particles: Me and Us, MD, US/A, Medea/Media, and Medusa.



J | O | H | N | C | A | M | P | I | O | N

The title is held in a grid that calls to mind a rifle scope. The whole of the page is framed with a triangle; Medusa sits at the top end while the individual letters of the author's

name, each in a separate cell, sit at the opposite end. This calls to mind Foucault's discussion (*Discipline and Punish*) of the architecture of a prison, a panopticon, where the guard, seated in the angle, can observe every cell. Here, Medusa sits in the guard's position, emblem of our police surveillance. The author's name in the cells must be considered an attempt at humor.... Keep in mind that extended techniques in themselves are to be evaluated by the degree to which they enhance the themes of a given work.

VII a

The first image of a text often functions as a microcosm of the entire art. When the image is sufficiently deep it can do so from any location in the work.

Here's the opening passage of Joyce's *Araby* from his book of stories *The Dubliners*. Study it and see how Joyce's techniques make meaning in multilateral ways.

NORTH RICHMOND STREET being blind, was a quiet Street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.

QUESTION: CAN YOU IMAGINE HOW THIS IMAGE MIGHT ENCAPSULATE THE LARGER WORK?

(Perhaps the text explores the lack of freedom in a repressed society as well as that society's complicity in preserving this condition through its own willful blindness.)

This brings us neatly to the second part of our seventh heading.

VII b

The first paragraph often functions as a microcosm of the whole work.

In Hemmingway's *Big, Two-Hearted River (Part I)*, notice how the opening paragraph functions. It shows a man surrounded by burned forest and resting on his overly heavy baggage.

The train went on up the track out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground.

Perhaps a literal understanding of the image is best. Nick's world is burned out and his baggage, mirroring his psychological baggage, is too much for him to carry--but

nevertheless, does SUPPORT him, as he sits on it. On this camping trip, Nick will eventually gain his shelter (tent) and sustenance (food) from the contents of this baggage. He literally eats the baggage that is figuratively eating at him.

VII c

By extension, the first image of a sentence (sometimes the entire sentence) often functions as a microcosm of the paragraph.

Look at this opening sentence from a paragraph in Hemmingway's *Big Two-Hearted River*:

Across the open mouth of the tent Nick fixed cheesecloth
to keep out mosquitoes

The paragraph is concerned with Nick putting up the mosquito netting. But it is also about Nick trying to keep something else out, troubling thoughts maybe. We'll return to this passage after the poem below for a more comprehensive view. But understanding the deep image of putting up the mosquito net, like the image of fishing itself, is crucial.

VIII a

External descriptions mirror internal states.

Referring to Hemmingway's piece above, note that the landscape description mirrors Nick's own personal burn out--so replete that his internal foundations are damaged.

The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the
ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that
was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned
off the ground.

VIII b

The form of a text is an extension of content.

Look at Steven's *13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. Reading it you will do it—look at a blackbird from 13 perspectives, one in each stanza.

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadows of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X
At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI
He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII
The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII
It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

You'll find many ways to use these recommendations in this poem. Follow the unfolding camera's eye as the poem reveals itself. How does the use of the word *eye* act in complicity with *I*? What does this signify in terms of the poem's view of identity?

Stanza one begins with Roman numeral I. What else is it? Why are the three lines in this stanza relevant? Does the number 13 appear in any other place? Are numbers found elsewhere in the poem? What does the poem say about some basic arithmetic ideas about identity? How can a man and a woman and a blackbird be one? Looking at stanzas I and XIII—can you detect any geometric form being drawn in a conceptual way? How does this connect with the poem's theme of identity? How does the poem suggest that identity can be both discrete and continuous?

VIII c
Sometimes form IS the content.

OR as Robert Creeley said: "Form is the shape of the content." Let's turn back to some fiction and see if some of the same techniques apply. In the *Big Two-Hearted River*, Nick has tried all day long NOT to think about a serious problem he has. Now we find him putting up a mosquito net on his tent. How do these activities relate? How is the use of language involved? How is this an example of form shaping content?

Across the open mouth of the tent Nick fixed cheesecloth to keep out mosquitoes. He crawled inside under the mosquito bar with various things from the pack to put at the head of the bed under the slant of the canvas. Inside the tent the light came through the brown canvas. It smelled pleasantly of canvas. Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. Now he was hungry.

Nick is trying to keep out mosquitoes and keep out pesky thoughts about his life too. But the salient point here is that he is making a net of language itself to facilitate his work of keeping things out. This can be seen in the seemingly boring repetition of lines that mirror the mind's work of stitching together a defense against the information he fears. At the end of this section, Nick drinks some coffee and then goes to bed when a mosquito gets in under the netting. How do the following two passages work in the story?

1

The coffee boiled as he watched. The lid came up and coffee and grounds ran down the side of the pot. Nick took it off the grill. It was a triumph for Hopkins. He put sugar in the empty apricot cup and poured some of the coffee out to cool. It was too hot to pour and he used his hat to hold the handle of the coffee pot. He would not let it steep in the pot at all. Not the first cup. It should be straight Hopkins all the way. Hop deserved that.

The coffee boils over. This too reinforces the idea that he was trying to contain his thoughts. But it was not to be. The repressed story and the feelings that come with it concern a character named Hopkins--whose name has not previously appeared. It is forcing its way to the surface....and making Nick deal with it and what it signifies.

AND at the end of Part I he manages to repress the unwanted material again.

2

A mosquito hummed close to his ear. Nick sat up and lit a match. The mosquito was on the canvas, over his head Nick moved the match quickly up to it. The mosquito made a satisfactory hiss in the flame. The match went out. Nick lay down again under the blanket. He turned on his side and shut his eyes. He was sleepy. He felt sleep coming. He curled up under the blanket and went to sleep.

Notice how the idea of burn(out) reappears. At this point he is able to put the pesky thought back to sleep, both with a match, AND with his repetitious and soporific language—through the device of the third-person interior monologue.

Read the story (its readily available) and see how Hemmingway's description of the line of the fishing rod connected to the living fish mirrors Hemmingway's use of lines of language that Nick employs to re-connect with the living world and the self after a trauma. It appears that the fishing trip, which Nick thinks is intended to help him get away from his problems, actually helps him deal with them.

IX

Consider how the order and position of words in a text, both spatially and temporally, affect the content. (This includes the line, sentence, paragraph, page, chapter, and the at-large.)

A line of poetry from *Altarwise by Owl-Light* by Dylan Thomas:

Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,

Abaddon (a dark image from the Book of Revelations) appears at the beginning of the line and Adam the end. How does this function? How does the word hangnail function (think of the crucifixion) and why is it important that it be in the middle of the line? How does its position anchor the idea in such a way as to magnify the content? Do you see how the idea links past and future, reconciles the living and the dead? Can other forms accomplish this?

NOTE: The message would be incomplete if the words appeared in a different order, say: *In the hangnail, Abaddon was cracked from Adam.* It would also fail to function completely if the line were broken prematurely, say

I have seen examples of heedless editors printing the poem with breaks like this:

Abaddon in the hangnail
Cracked from Adam.

In short, location is part of the poem. It is also part of MEMORY, a necessary companion to INSPIRATION—and one of the sets of twins that Leda gives birth to (See *Leda and the Swan* again.) Frances Yates tells the story in *The Art of Memory* how the poet Simonides of Ceos (as recompense for his poem) is given this art by these same twin gods, Castor and Pollux. In Yates's story after a recital of his lyric poem, the poet was denied full payment by the host (Scopas of Thessaly) who resented having to share the poem's dedication with Castor and Pollux (whoever they are!). Just as the poet was explaining that he wasn't sharing the honor with any other mortals, the twin gods call the poet outside to reward him in full.

Meanwhile, the cement roof flattens everyone at the banquet table right into their couches. When the roof is removed, the relatives are forlorn because they can't recognize their own for proper burial. Having received the gift of the art of memory, the poet is the only one who can determine the identity of each guest, by virtue of his memory of where each one had been sitting when the roof collapsed. Thus, IDEA in a specific PLACE enhances a work of art, gives it structure and provides content with an anchor for truth.

X

Be careful about the order of the images too—what comes first and what follows. The way they unfold—or if they unfold at the same time—makes meaning.

Certainly there is a difference between a story concerning an animal auction and another story about a man making a pass at a woman. There is also an important difference between both of these and one that tells the story of a man making a proposition to a woman while an animal auction goes on in the background at the same time and on the same narrative plane! When they overlap and are stitched together, a new connotation is made. In the Hemmingway story, Nick first goes through a burned landscape and then goes to the water to fish. This reflects his passage from burnout to healing baptism. That the story ends with a swamp that he is afraid to fish suggests that Nick still has some difficult work yet to do.

Read Flaubert for plenty of these lessons in montage or take a look at Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* or Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

XI

Read what is said and what is not said.

In *The Snow Man*, Wallace Stevens describes the emptiness about and within us:

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Clearly, the thing that is not said can be a thing. Earlier we mentioned Hemmingway's short work *Hills Like White Elephants*. The word *abortion* is never used; yet it is extremely important to the case. One could make the argument that the work itself revolves around the thing that is not. Here form too—in the form of the unformed—is the content. The title (I told you I'd return to that) seems to suggest something that isn't wanted (a white elephant) and something else that isn't wanted (a child)—the hills link them both. Time out of mind in India, a chief ruler would give to his corrupt provincial governors the gift of a white elephant—but because it was sacred, it could not be worked to recover the heavy expense of its upkeep. In this way, his underlings were taught to care better for the welfare of the people in their charge.

XII

A Text is an ecosystem.

Go out and look at nature. And check out some-thing made by humans, a building or an example of landscape architecture. Consider the relationship between human culture (and art) and nature. What function does art have? On UC Berkeley campus there's a building that resembles one from the old Soviet bloc. The style is commonly known as Nuevo Brutal. What does it suggest that it is on an American campus and that it houses the Architecture Department? Nearby, there's a Music performance building that looks like a protestant church. The typology of a work of art shapes our expectations.

Think about the vertical lines as well as the usual horizontal ones. Think of entrances and exits, and all the associations you can. Look at the last page from John Champion's book-length poem, *Tongue Stones*. This book was the first of three ecotropic works—which holds that for human culture to be healthy it must exist in an ecological niche.

Under your limbs
find me laughing

our prospective place of transmutation

on a bed
carved of living tree
the lovers make a circle

do it over

Up to this concluding page, the poem has functioned as a social criticism that finally exhorts us to do it over—that we are not doomed and that we do have an opportunity to make a better world. All of this is embodied in the landscape architecture of this page. The book begins (trust me) on page one with a reference to Ulysses. At the end of his journey, like the end of the book, the traveler returns full circle to find his wife Penelope wondering if he still cares. The reader has traveled with him through a phantasmagoric history of human travail and error. But the return of love makes the future possible.

The physical layout presents a tree, a triangle, and a circle. The seven lines hold the tree and the page itself in sacred space. The magical and holy triangle at the top contains a unified image of time: the past in the concept of memory (*Under*), the future in the concept of positive projection (*prospective*), and the redolent present in the concept of a moment that can use both the past and future in a continuous and alchemical transformation (*transmutation*).

The tree is the mythic world tree, but is also the bedstead on which Penelope and Ulysses are finally reunited in a circular embrace. Penelope knows that he still cares, because he remembered what no one else can know: that their bed was carved from a living tree. This creates the poem's moment of hierogamos, its sacred union.

The poet's remonstrations with the reader (in this particular book) end with the image of the uroborus, the serpent with the tail in its mouth--manifested in the lovers and the circle made by the poem's first word *Under* and its last *over*.

XIII

Meaning is Co-evolutionary and Consensual.

Keep an open mind and talk about it with others. Think about what art is for and how it functions. Be critical. Some have said the function of art is to cushion our fall from the garden, to make our separation from the natural world more bearable—to rationalize the death of our own animal--as it is acted out in the theatre of the bull fight ritual. Others say it is to make the king's orders more palatable to his minions, an act of surveillance, discipline, and social control. Some say it is to give in a human tongue the utterances of God. To some it is meaningless and demonstrates the pointlessness of existence. Still, others say we do it for the reclamation of the garden we lost and for the continuation of the human community within nature.

We are not really individuals separate from others, but are consortia—made up of all the interrelated things of earth, living and non-living, indeed, made up of all the fields of forces. Our bodies are full of bacteria and relics of bacteria. With regard to DNA, our readable code, we are more OTHER than SELF. But like GAIA, we have our limitations and our boundaries, and we are autopoietic entities that reproduce ourselves.

Olson sought out a text that was *Equal, that Is, to the Real Itself*. Sounds good to me; certainly a text influences, is influenced by, and is part of the real world. And let's remember also that the art of producing meaning, READING, like language, is something that we do together; it is part of the ecology. Its work is an act of consilience.