

ILLITERACY: THE ULTIMATE CRIME

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The issue of reading has a privileged position in Ruth's Rendell's novels. In several, the uses of reading and its effects are discussed in some detail. But so are the uses of not reading and the non-readers. The non-readers in Rendell's novels also have a special position.

The murderer in *The House of Stairs* is a non-reader but even so she is influenced by what other people read. Non-readers often share the view that reading is antisocial or that it is difficult to understand the fascination that books, those "small, flattish boxes"¹ have for their readers. But Burden is the most notorious non-reader who comes to mind. His evolution is sketched throughout the Inspector Wexford mysteries. In *From Doom with Death* (1964) he thinks that it is not healthy to read, but Wexford lends him *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* for his bedtime reading, and the effects on his turn of phrase are immediate:

'I suppose the others could have been just-well, playthings as it were, and Mrs. P. a life-long love.'
'Christ!', Wexford roared. 'I should never have let you read that book. Playthings, life-long love! You make me puke' (p. 125).

In the 1970 novel *A Guilty Thing Surprised*, Burden still feels embarrassed by his superior's "tedious bookishness", and knows the difference between fiction and real life. Proustian or Shakespearean references are lost on Burden in *No More Dying*

Then (1971). In the next two Inspector Wexford mysteries there are virtually no references to Burden's gradual evolution. But in *Wolf to the Slaughter* (1975) several instances of Burden's insensitivity to literary quotation and language in general are given. He fails to distinguish between literal and metaphorical uses of language. In this novel the attitude of Burden to language is that of an illiterate clown, as described by Robert Pattison in *On Literacy*.

The clown carries insensitivity to language to its absurd, illiterate extreme. He operates like a computer, capable of spewing forth words, sentences, puns, aperçus, but unconscious of what he does. The illiterate clown is a producer but never a consumer of wit. Though he can speak, and perhaps even read and write (...) he is devoid of any critical awareness of language. For the clown, language is simple and inflexible, habitual but unconscious (...) The clown is programmed to understand language in its most literal form. He cannot adjust for context, tone, or nuance (Pattison 1982, p. 14).

But Burden is becoming sensitive to the criticism that his philistine attitudes elicit from Wexford. He is offended by Wexford's criticism that his attitude reminds him of Goering's towards culture, and he even attempts to show that he recognizes an author's name when he sees one.

But we have to wait until *Put on by Cunning* (1981) to see any significant change in Burden's relation to literature:

In former days, during the lifetime of Burden's first wife and afterwards in his long widowerhood, no book apart from those strictly necessary for the children's school work was ever seen in that house. But when he remarried things changed. And it could not be altogether due to the fact that his wife's brother was a publisher, though this might have helped, that the inspector was becoming a reading man. It was even said, though Wexford refused to believe it, that Burden and Jenny read aloud to each

other in the evenings, that they had got through Dickens and were currently embarking on the Waverley novels (p. 64).

His analytical powers, and therefore his detective work, seem to improve, and Wexford wonders if "they were the fruit of happiness or of reading aloud from great literature in the evenings" (*Put on by Cunning*, p. 86).

This seems to be as far as Burden will go. In the subsequent novels, *An Unkindness of Ravens* (1985) and *The Veiled One* (1988) we are confronted again with an inspector who, like Monsieur Jourdain, does not know what prose is, who is unaware that he is quoting (*An Unkindness of Ravens*, p. 167), and thinks that an oxymoron is "a mental disease" (*The Veiled One*, p. 48). Awareness of the problems posed by language and skill in the expression of this awareness are the attributes of Wexford, and they remain so.

These two elements can be said to be, following Robert Pattison, the common core of literacy. In this sense, Burden remains the illustration of illiteracy, and Wexford the highly literate character. There is of course a difference between the meaning of illiteracy when we say that Burden is represented as illiterate and when we say that in the 1980's, according to *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*, there were two million illiterate people in the United Kingdom. A narrow definition of literacy as mastering the techniques of writing and reading excludes Burden from the group of 3.5% illiterate people in the U.K. But a broader one, including awareness of the problems and uses of language, probably implies that Burden is indeed represented as illiterate. The ambiguity seems to derive from the fact that the signifier *illiteracy* covers two signifieds that in other languages are represented by two different words. One of them indicates inability to use reading and writing techniques, and the other conveys indifference to the problems posed by language, particularly written language, and in particular literary language.

Literacy and illiteracy have to be thought of in historical terms as well. According to Pattison (1982), Shakespeare's father, who became a magistrate in Stratford, could not write. He witnessed official documents with a cross or a mark representing a pair of compasses. Nowadays, no magistrate could hold office if

they had that sort of illiteracy. What is more, mastery of the techniques of writing and reading has come to be seen as the cornerstone of civilization as we know it, and its universal spread is advocated both as a means of progress and of conservation of values. This has not always been so. Writing as a form of communication has become a natural and valuable means and new media, in particular television, tend to be seen as a threat to the survival of written communication, the most uplifting and least alienating of the techniques of communication. As Pattison (1982) suggests, alongside social utility, the moral necessity of this techniques is posited in the scenario drawn by critics of declining standards of literacy. One thing that has puzzled me in the investigation conducted by sociologists and linguists that I have consulted is that they should find it possible to apply different criteria to assess levels of literacy in different epochs and places, and still find it justifiable to make generalizations about degrees of literacy.

In *A Judgement in Stone* (1977), Ruth Rendell also attempts to discuss the problem of illiteracy. The main character is Eunice Parchman, a middle-aged woman who becomes housekeeper to an affluent and highly literate family. She and Joan Smith, a disturbed woman who is a follower of a minor religious sect, murder the household on a Sunday night, while they are watching *Don Giovanni* on television. There is no particular motive for their action, and the causes are identified as Joan's madness and, above all, Eunice's illiteracy. In fact, the novel opens with the following sentence:

Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family
because she could not read or write.

Are we confronted with a *roman à thèse* about illiteracy? Possibly. It is certain that illiteracy is a major preoccupation of this novel. One proposition that seems to me to sum up the line of thought followed is that "literacy is in our veins like blood" (p. 63). "To be illiterate is to be deformed" (p. 7) and therefore, "the derision that was once directed at the physical freak may, perhaps more justly, descend upon the illiterate". This is in line with the opinion that Pattison sees as typically held:

The man² who cannot read and write is today in the West considered unfinished, uncivilized, perhaps even inhuman, a social judgement that may be widely disproportionate to the loss he suffers through his inability (Pattison 1982, p. 131).

In the presentation of the main character, this belief that to be illiterate is to be nearly inhuman is phrased in an abrupt way:

She had the awful practical sanity of the atavistic ape disguised as twentieth-century woman (p. 7).

Lombroso, the influential Italian criminologist of the beginning of this century, describes the typical criminal as an "atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals". And he compares criminals to savages and apes.³

There are two conclusions that can be drawn at this stage. The first is that this novel reproduces the ideology of capitalistic societies of the twentieth century, by representing literacy as part and parcel of the notion of the autonomy of the individual shown in her/ his control over her/ his own progress. Physical freaks are not to blame for their deformities, but the scorn once directed at them can "perhaps more justly" be re-directed to the illiterate. The second conclusion to be drawn is that literacy helps define us in opposition to our primitive ancestors, by removing from us a practical sanity that is awful. It is perhaps not accidental that a female character should be chosen to play the role of this "atavistic being" who is illiterate and criminal. In ten of her novels, Rendell presents female murderers, a figure which is not faithful to the actual rate of male and female murderers. The direct or remote motive for the murder in all of these novels lies in psychological deviations. In the case of the novel under discussion, illiteracy is the cause of an "awful sanity" that leads to murder, when it is in contact with an "awful insanity" (that of her accomplice, Joan) and with a stylized, literate life (the Coverdales's). Why precisely Eunice's sanity is awful is illustrated in the novel. Although Eunice can neither read nor write, she has all the basic skills that enable her to satisfy her needs. She can recognize the things she wants to buy (mostly chocolates) by the colours of their wrappings, and she has a very good retentive memory. She uses

her powers of observation to acquire knowledge about people with which to blackmail them afterwards. She knows how to kill: her father, when she cannot stand looking after him any more, and the Caverdale family, after they disturb her peace and show her that they know her secret. Up to now she has been able to hide her condition from everyone except her close family, a friend, and a neighbour who afterwards becomes one of her blackmail victims. Thus, this "awful practical sanity", being a consequence of her illiteracy, has also helped her disguise it. Another consequence has been, according to the text, that "illiteracy [had] dried up her sympathy and atrophied her imagination" (p. 48).

Two questions arise from these positions, one relating to the social benefits of literacy and the other to the personal progress obtained through reading. Firstly, possession of the techniques of reading and writing plays the role of a deterrent of unsocial behaviour in literate societies. As Pattison suggests, the inability to respond to written information is often seen as a peril to the existing order of society in the same way as if we choose to disobey or ignore orders (Pattison 1982, p. 179). I must say that, as a foreigner, I am struck by the overflow of written instructions that people are supposed to obey in Britain. Not only do these instructions try to promote compliance with social rules, but they also seek to shape individual patterns of behaviour. It can be said that the personal is always socially relevant, but if I scald my hands because I do not recognize the word *hot* written on the hot water tap, the personal is paramount, while if I comb my hair over the wash-basin, then other people will be affected (I wonder how deeply) by my anti-social behaviour. Not crossing the line except by means of the underpass ensures both my personal safety and the smooth running of trains, and the notice that gives me such an order also affords some linguistic amusement. Apart from the authorities that supervise the writing of these notices, several institutions and individuals have been and have been and remain interested in the spread of literacy.

But although Eunice Parchman is not able to decipher all the social rules that are transmitted in writing, she is not presented as having faced any major difficulty in dealing with all the practical sides of living — in a city, London, which is written all over, and in the countryside. When she moves to the country to work for the Coverdales, her employers leave her notes which she, in their

view, ignores, and when she is asked to read a grocery list over the telephone, in desperation she goes down to the village shop, run by Joan Smith and her husband, and contrives to be told what is in the list. On the few occasions in which she is faced with the written word, she resorts to a common reaction of illiterate people, namely, saying that she is short-sighted. The family takes her to an optician, and she is clever enough to deceive them into believing that the pair of glasses she has bought are actually for short-sightedness and not plain glass; and afterwards she often gives as an excuse for not reading that she has forgotten her glasses. As far as the practicalities of concealing illiteracy are concerned, she seems to be quite successful. It is in her personal relationships that her oddity comes out more clearly. She rejects any type of intimacy with anyone for fear of being found out. And this is the field in which her illiteracy affects her the most. It is also the cause of her killing the Coverdales Melinda, the daughter, is a student of English literature, but she was the one "who read the least" in the household (p. 55). She is the one who tries to show Eunice the most affection, and when she insists with her that they read out to one another the quizz in a magazine, she finds out that Eunice is dyslexic. Eunice threatens to tell her parents what she has overheard in a telephone conversation, that Melinda is pregnant. But Melinda is not pregnant, and even if she had been, she would have stood up to blackmail. So, she tells her parents what Eunice has done, and that she cannot read. They dismiss her.

It is not just reading as a means of practical communication and the preservation of the social order that is highly rated in the novel. Reading literature plays an important role in the lives of the Coverdales, and Eunice is at a loss to understand why anyone should want to read so much all the time. The Coverdales, husband, wife and younger son are not just readers, they are also critical readers. When he tells the story of how he became addicted to fiction, Lennard Davis writes:

At Columbia College, I joined not only the novel readers but the novel analyzers. The novel was not just a good read, not simply a raiser of moral and intellectual worth, it was a fantastically revered and sacred text (Davis 1987, p. 10).

Jacqueline and George (Eunice's employers) read mostly novels:

Jacqueline read every new novel of note, and she and George re-read their way through Victorian novels, their closeness emphasized by their often reading some work of Dickens or Thackeray or George Eliot at the same time, so as later to discuss a character or a scene together (pp. 55-6).

In the case, reading enhances allegiances and intimacy. It should be noted that they read novels, a genre which depends more than any other on literacy. Narrative fiction is the only genre that was meant to be the object of solitary reading from the start, unlike lyric poetry or drama. Even the diary form and the epistolary form of the first English novels, represent a literate society, in which people write letters or a journal that an editor happens to have access to. Jacqueline and George overcome the separateness and individualism of reading novels by reading them at the same time in order to discuss them afterwards. But the effect of reading on Giles, Jacqueline's son, is to draw him away from human contact, and to provide an escape from what he sees as trivial social obligations. He is in the habit of pinning quotes on the cork wall in his bedroom (a habit that Eunice fears and resents), and the only one that is written by him declares: "Some say life is the thing, but I prefer reading".

It is not self-evident that reading possesses any intrinsic value. It can be disputed whether reading has any advantage over other ways of obtaining information, for example, but one thing that seems certain is that in the Western world and its areas of influence reading has become indissociable from the progress of civilization and personal advancement. The ability to hold a bunch of folded sheets of paper that are glued together along a spine, direct our eyes to lines and dots and translate them into utterable words is certainly admirable. It reveals manual dexterity, an ability to focus our eyes, the possession of a doubly-articulated language and many other impressive abilities. But if we remove ourselves one stage, the control we have over our decrease or increase of respect towards reading is defined according to precarious criteria. In other words, it is not just the capacity to

translate conventional symbols into meaning that may elicit unqualified respect, because what we do with this capacity is already part of our cultural make-up and is, therefore, largely determined by what the community sanctions. The ability to read is taken for granted, and therefore it does not evoke any particular emotions: the more readers behave in conformity with idealised models of reading the more capable they will be made to feel by the reading communities that sanction such models. The habit of reading is construed as one of the most important pillars of our culture, and it is, in the case of this novel, very appropriate that Eunice should be the illiterate housekeeper of a family who are upholders of the cultural tradition. By relieving Jacqueline from tiresome housekeeping tasks, she enables her to devote more time to cultural pursuits.

As a polemic against the perils of illiteracy this novel seems to me to be far from persuasive. But it is very effective in its description of the consequences obtaining in a situation pushed to its limits, namely that of the co-habitation of straight illiteracy and high literacy.

Eunice's illiteracy and the Coverdales' literacy are mutually incomprehensible and incompatible. One instance of the chasm (which also has class overtones) is given by showing the different uses that television is put to by these representatives of two cultural and social worlds. Eunice had never been able to buy a television set and until going to live at the Coverdales's she had only ever watched a coronation and a royal wedding on it. But at the Coverdale's she has her own set, and she develops an addiction to television and a taste for violent programmes. On the other hand, the only time that the Coverdales are described watching television, it is *Don Giovanni* they are watching, and they are killed before the end of the programme. It goes without saying that this opera has not yet been "devalued" by "popularization", to borrow the words of Bourdieu. If they had been watching *Carmen*, for example, its middlebrow status, acquired through its popularization, would provide a less convincing contrast to Eunice's tastes. Eunice soon becomes addicted to watching television; when the Coverdales go on holiday, she draws the curtains against the summer evenings and concentrates on her police series, preferably with a bag of

chocolates on her lap. The Coverdales move the television into another room, and make an event out of watching an opera on TV, having coffee in the invernial, and taking notes. They adopt a "suitable", "sane" attitude towards television, and have a respectful but intimate relation with the products of high culture.

In the introduction to *Distinction*, Bourdieu draws attention to the necessity to take into account the multiple senses of "culture":

... fully understand cultural practices unless "culture", in the restricted normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into "culture" in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavour of food (Bourdieu 1984, p. 1).

Attributing to Eunice "lower" tastes and to the Coverdales more "refined" ones, is part of the caricature of two social classes which co-exist in society, holding opposed cultural values, and using them to legitimate social differences, as Bourdieu suggests. But cultural consumption fulfills a social function of legitimating social differences regardless of whether it is highbrow or lowbrow culture products that are consumed, or "coarse" or "sophisticated" taste that is adopted. The Coverdales assert their legitimacy as aspiring landed gentry through the adoption of cultural attitudes that befit them, and Eunice asserts her status of a working-class Londoner out of place in the country through the same devices. Hot, strong tea is for her, not coffee, and fish and chips are much preferable to stuffed vine leaves. She does not admire or try to emulate the Coverdales or obtain their understanding, because she does not accord them any superiority. She does not envy the ability to read which they possess and she does not; she simply does not understand what its value is, apart from its more practical uses.

In *A Copper Peacock*, a short-story by Ruth Rendell, the issue of the clash between two social classes in terms of tastes is also treated. A writer of biographies of obscure literary figures (that is, completely disinterested intellectual work) uses a friend's flat to work in, and he meets his cleaning-lady. She is very friendly and

calls him by his Christian name, which he finds slightly shocking, so he tries to keep her at a distance. But he is soon contemplating having an affair with her, partly because she seems to admire him, and listen attentively to his intelligent monologues about his work, and partly because he has a literary antecedent in the fact that James Joyce married a chambermaid, as well as in the details of the life of the minor poet that he is writing. But she offers him a bookmark for his birthday, a copper peacock, a "tasteless vulgar object" (p. 111). And he immediately withdraws from her. She stops coming to work, and his conclusion is that "it was of course a mistake to be too friendly with these people, to put them on a level with oneself" (p. 113). She had in fact been murdered by the man who used to beat her up. In this short-story, as *A Judgement in Stone*, the clash between different tastes of different social classes is complicated by the fact that both Eunice and the cleaning lady of the short-story have slightly anachronistic jobs. As the biographer in the short-story reflects, no-one is used to servants nowar days. For the Coverdales and the biographer of a minor Victorian poet they have the vulgar tastelessness of the working-classes, but they are mythical figures of a more cultured past. Bourdieu quotes Besançon in a statement that is quite appropriate for this situation:

And we do not yet know whether the cultural life can survive the disappearance of domestic servants.⁴

Books are "small flattish boxes packed with mystery and threat" (*A Judgement...*, p. 55). And the uses we give them nowadays in the West are as mysterious and threatening as the uses that they have had in other epochs and are now having in other cultures. Furthermore, what is in books that are called novels is doubly mysterious and threatening for readers and non-readers alike. In an aside in *Beginnings*, Edward Said suggests that "the novel is the aesthetic form of servitude: no other genre so completely renders the meaning of secondariness" (Said 1985, p. 86). He makes this aside in the discussion of Kierkegaard's distinction between the religious and the aesthetic text, in which the notion that "fiction alone speaks or is written — for truth has no need of words — and that all voices are assumed ones"

becomes a relevant contribution to the issue of the desirability of reading fiction. The secondariness of fiction, far from giving it a secondary role, posits its function as an intermediary between self and truth. It is, I think, this reliance on fiction as the bearer of access to some form of essential truth, which would be otherwise inaccessible, that is expounded in *A Judgement in Stone*.

Rendell does not seek to show that the crime committed by Eunice is due to her illiteracy alone, had Coverdales been philistines they might still be alive. Once again, somewhat more indirectly than in *Make Death Love Me*, a point being made is that people who read and stand in reverence before cultural products put themselves in a vulnerable position, and people who do not or cannot read are not normal. Non-readers are freaks of nature, readers are victims. The non-readers in Rendell's novels hesitate between fear of and contempt for, or at least irritation towards books, readers and reading; but they never show indifference.

Notes

- 1 *A Judgement in Stone*, p. 55.
- 2 And maybe the woman as well?
- 3 Cited in Jones, Howard (1965) *Crime in a Changing Society*. London
- 4 *Etre Russe au XIX^e siècle* by Alain Besançon, quoted in Bourdieu 1984.

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