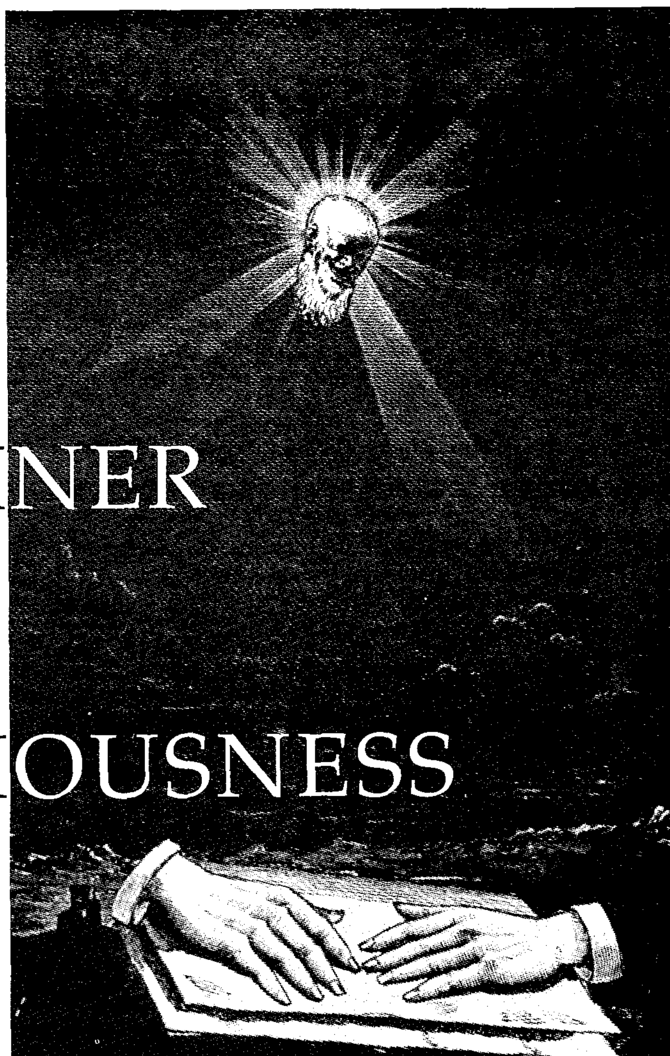
The Book As a Container Of Consciousness

BY WILLIAM H. GASS



The Seven Capital Elements *(1934), by Max Ernst*

"So! You've written a book! What's in it?"

When Hamlet was asked what he was reading, he replied "words, words, words." That's what's in it.

Imagine words being "in" anything other than the making mouth, the intervening air, the receiving ear. For formerly they were no more substantial than the rainbow, an arch of tones between you and me. "What is the matter, my lord?" Polonius asks, to which Hamlet answers, "Between who?" twisting the meaning in a lawyerlike fashion, although he might have answered more symmetrically: pages, pages, pages . . . that is the matter . . . paper and sewing thread and ink . . . the word made wood.

Early words were carved on a board of beech, put on thin leaves of a fiber that might be obtained from bamboo and then bound by cords, or possibly etched in ivory, or scratched on tablets made of moist clay. Signs were chiseled in stone, inked on

unsplit animal skin stretched very thin and rolled, or painted on the pith of the papyrus plant. A lot later, words were typed on paper, microfilmed, floppy disked, photocopied, faxed. As we say about dying, the methods vary. Carving required considerable skill, copying a lengthy education, printing a mastery of casting—in every case, great cost—and hence words were not to be taken lightly. (They might have been, indeed, on lead.) They were originally so rare in their appearance that texts were sought out, signs were visited like points of interest, the words themselves were worshiped; therefore the effort and expense of writing them was mostly devoted to celebrating the laws of the land, recording community histories, and keeping business accounts.

These marks, each and every one, required a material that would receive them, and a space where they might spread out, since they were becoming visible for the first time, made formerly from air and as momentary as music. They were displacing themselves from their familiar source: the lips, teeth, tongue, the mouth from which they normally emerged on their journey to an ear. Before there was writing and paper and printing, though words remained in the trail left by their maker like the ashes of a fire or the spoor of a deer, another sort of stability had to be achieved, since it would scarcely do the speaking soul much good or the listener any harm, if words were no more felt than a breeze briefly touching the cheek. As we know, many of language's earliest formations had a mnemonic purpose. They made play with the materialities of speech, breaking into the stream of air that bore their sounds—displaying speed and vehemence, creating succession—and working with the sounds, the *oh*s and *ah*s themselves, possibly because, like the baby's babbling, it was fun, and a fresh feat for a new life, but more practically because, when the sense of a sentence or a saying was overdetermined, and the words connected by relations other than the ideas they represented by themselves, then they were more firmly posted up in memory, and might like a jest be repeated, and like a jingle, acted on, leading to the casting of a vote or the purchase of bread, to the support of the very cause which the sentence, wound like that snake around one of Eve's limbs to beguile her, had slyly suggested.

When cast in lead, carved in bark, billboarded by a highway, up in lights, words had a palpability they had never had before. Nor did they need all the machinery of rhyme and rhythm and phrasing, of rhetoric's schemes or poetry's alliterations, since they could be consulted again and again, pored over, studied, annotated, lauded, denied. For Plato, though, the written word had lost its loyalty to the psyche that had been its source, and Phaedrus could hold beneath his cloak a roll on which another's words were written, words that Phaedrus thought he might soon pronounce, allowing them to seem his, performing passions and stating beliefs not necessarily held or felt by him, handing his conscience over to a ghost, practicing to be a president. Although the written word made possible compilations of data, subtleties of analysis, persistence of examination, and complexities of thought that had hitherto seemed impossible, it contributed to the atrophy of memory, and, eventually, by dispelling the aura of the oral around words, to the absence of weight, consequence, and conviction as well.

Except that poets and prophets and canny politicians continued to write as if they spoke for the soul, and to this end their sentences sometimes still sang in a recognizable voice. However, the displayed word was almost immediately given fancier and fancier dress; calligraphic sopranos soon bewitched the eye; creatures, personalities, events, and other referents were pictured alongside lan-

guage to amplify it, dignify it, illuminate it, give it the precious position it deserved. So unchecked and exuberant was this development of the visual that writing was often reduced to making headlines or composing captions.

Add radio to print and the word became ubiquitous. It overhung the head like smoke, and had to be ignored as one ignores most noise. It was by loose use corrupted, by misuse debased, by overuse destroyed. It flew in any eye that opened, in any ear hands didn't hide, and became, instead of the lord of truth, the servant of the lie.

Readers were encouraged to race like a motorcar across the page, taking turns on two wheels, the head as silent as an empty house, eager for the general gist, anxious to get on. Rarely did a reader read in the old-fashioned, hesitant, lip-moving way—by listening rather than by looking, allowing the language fastened on the page its own performance; for then it would speak as though souled, and fly freely away into the space of the mind as it once had in the rarer atmospheres of the purely spoken world.

New notations confound old orders and create essential changes. The alphabet helps make the mind, and language becomes not only the very vehicle of thought but much of its cargo. Music bursts forth into its modern form when signs that facilitate sight-reading emerge from neumes, and when the voice learns it must do more than merely rise and fall to please. As a consequence of the miracle of the modern scale, the composer could take down imagined music. Similarly, more than memory is served when objects are reduced to reproducible, transmissible dots. The image is now as triumphant as money, as obnoxious as the politician's spiel, as ignored as other people's pain, as common as the cold.

In sum: there is the observed word, watched as you might an ant or an interesting bird; and there is, of course, the spoken word as well, since we still make conversation, go to plays, and look on in a contrived night while movie stars enunciate clichés as if such commonplaces were the only language. But, in addition, there are the silent sounds we make within the hall of our head when we talk to ourselves, or take any prose or poetry seriously enough to perform it, to listen to it with our brains, as we do when we read this delicious bit from Jeremy Taylor, one of English prose's greatest masters, about the difficulty of dying:

> Take away but the pomps of death, the disguises and solemn bugbears, the tinsel, and the actings by candlelight, and proper and fantastic ceremonies, the minstrels and the noise-makers, the women and the weepers, the swoonings and the shriekings, the nurses and the physicians, the dark room and the ministers, the kindred and the watchers; and then to die is easy, ready, and quitted from its troublesome circumstances.

These are lines composed for the pulpit and delivered to the ear as honesty ought. Nearer to our time, there is now and then prose whose performance is only hoped for, bidden but rarely achieved, as any of Proust or James or, as in the following passage, Joyce:

> I call her Sosy because she's sosiety for me and she says sossy while I say sassy and she says will you have some more scorns while I say won't you take a few more schools and she talks about ithel dear while I simply never talk about

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athel darling she's but nice for enticing my friends and she loves your style considering she breaksin me shoes for me when I've arch trouble and she would kiss my white arms for me so gratefully but apart from that she's terribly nice really, my sister. . . .

It is natural to suppose that the splitting up of the printed line (composed of alphabet blocks and blocklike spaces), as well as the arrangement of these lengths in rows on the plane of the page, and the subsequent piling of pages one upon another to form the material volume of the text, which the book's case will then retain and protect, are all the most normal and modest of conventions, as, of course, the sounds and letters are (indeed, it comprises a perfectly Euclidean lesson in spatial construction, beginning with points, assembling their numbers into lines, combining the lines to form planes, and, by stacking these, eventually achieving volume); and that there is nothing about the book, as a material entity, neither in its pages, nor in its lines, nor in its principles of manufacture, which is essential to the meaning and nature of its text, no more than the shelf that holds the spices is a spice itself or adds to their piquancy or savor.

Even if sounds once wonderfully mimicked the various kinds of things and creatures that populated nature, and even if ancient hieroglyphs depicted their referents as faithfully as the most vulgar bourgeois painter, by now these resemblances have been forgotten and are no longer relevant, because it is the sheerest accident, as far as sense goes, that "book" and "look," "hook" and "crook," "brook" and "spook," "nook" and "cook" share twin *o*'s, like Halloween eyes, and terminate in *k*, as do "kook" and "rook." Moreover, the relation between "hoot" and the owl's "toot" and the train's, "soot" and smudge, "loot" and L.A., is perfectly arbitrary, could be anything at all, except that frequently used words tend to be short, and coarse words Anglo-Saxon.

So one is inclined by common sense and local practice to consider the book as a simple vehicle for the transportation of texts, and no more does the meaning of a text change when clapped between unaccustomed covers than milk curdles when carried by a strange maid.

However, as the philosopher Whitehead suggested, common sense should find a wall on which to hang itself. That the size of type, the quality of paper, the weight of what the hands hold, the presence and placement of illustration, the volume's age, evidence of wear and tear, previous ownership and markings, sheer expense, have no effect upon the reader, and do not alter the experience of the text, is as absurd as supposing that *Aida* sounds the same to box or gallery, or that ice cream licks identically from cone or spoon or dish or dirty finger.

I hear an objection: the meaning of the text cannot change unless the text changes. Any reaction to that meaning is certainly dependent upon external factors, including one reader's indigestion and another reader's mood. However, the text remains the text, regardless of print, paper, and purse strings, unless you alter the words and their procession.

Let us consider the word, first, in terms of the ontology of its composition. This will be the same, in a way, as considering any larger units, whether they be phrases, paragraphs, pages, volumes, or sets.

The words I am writing now, for instance, are not words in the full sense; they are, first of all, marks on an otherwise unmarked page, then sounds undulating in a relatively quiet space. However, these marks and these sounds are but emissaries and idols themselves, what logicians call tokens, of the real English words—namely "now," namely "writing," namely "m," namely "I," namely "words," namely "the"—or what logicians refer to as the Language Type. If this were not so, then, if I were to erase the word "word" from this

paragraph's opening clause—"the words I am writing now"—or if I were to fall firmly silent in front of the *w* and refuse to go on; then there'd be no more "word" for word, written or spoken, like that momentarily notorious expression, "dibbit ulla rafiné snerx," which was said once—just now—written hardly at all, given this temporary body only to disappear without ever gaining a soul, that is to say, a significance.

To be precise, we do not write words or speak them either. We use their tokens, or stand-ins. Each hand, each voice, is unique; each stamp, each line of print, is somewhat less so, though they form the same message, ACCOUNT OVERDRAWN, on the checks of so many members of Congress, in the headlines of the papers, in the accusations of impropriety by their constituents. But the Language Type is the same, whatever the ink, the cut of the stamp, the font, the accent, tone of voice. At this level a word is more than its meanings; it is also a group of rules for its spelling and pronunciation, as well as a set of specifications that state its grammatical class and determine its proper placement and use in the normal sentence. That is, if my recent paragraph's opening had been "I am words writing the," we should recognize the tokens—"the" is still "the" there, as far as its marks mean and its sounds sign, but we should have trouble assigning them their Language Types, for "the" is not where "the" belongs, articling up to something.

Let us journey into Plato's country for a moment, and speak of the Pure Type, not merely a linguistic one. Although *mot* means "word" and *wort* means "word" and *parole* means "word" and *word*, to be fair, means *logos* means *verbum*, and so on, from tongue to tongue, the pure Word they each depend on, and which comprises their common core, has no rules for its formation, since it escapes all specific materiality, has been, in fact, never written, never spoken, never thought, only dreamed during our extrapolations, envisioned solely by great Gee'd Geist, large aR'd Reason, or the high-sided eM of Mind.

This progression—from verbal token to Language Type, and from that Type to unspoken Idea—has always seemed to some philosophers to be eminently reasonable, while it appears to others as an example of Reason capitalized, another case of reification, and, like Common Sense before, leading us astray. But imagine for a moment that all the tokens of a particular Language Type have been removed from past or present use, as the Führer wished to do with Jewish names. Even so, we would be able to generate tokens once again, since we should still have a definition, know the word's part of speech, and understand its spelling. Indeed, only intellectually is it possible to separate the spelling of a word from the word itself. To show how a word is spelled, one writes the word. However, if the Language Type were also removed, the word would at once disappear, and disappear for good, because the Pure Type has no material instantiation. It is a limit. Which means that words have a special kind of nonspecific or floating residence, because our belief even in a Pure Type depends on there being at least one material instance (or the rules for making such an instance) in existence. Which is as true of the book as the word, for, in a way, the book itself isn't "in" any one example of its edition either, although at least one copy has to be about, or the printer's plates, along with the outline for its manufacture.

In any case, something interesting happens when we examine an extended text from the point of view of these distinctions. *Madame Bovary*, for instance, has been translated into many languages, but does this feat mean there is a Pure, un-French *Madame B*, one beyond any ordinary verbal exactness or lyrical invention? Clearly *Madame Bovary* is confined to its language, and that language is not merely French in some broad,

undifferentiated sense, but is Flaubert's so particularly that no other hand could have handled the studied pen of its composition. In short, as we rose, somewhat dubiously, from the token to the Pure Type, we now, more securely, mark the descent from a general language such as French to the specific style of artists such as Flaubert or Proust. With their native tongue they speak a personal language, and may even, as in the case of Henry James, have a late as well as an early phase.

They achieve this individuality of style, as we shall see, by being intensely concerned with the materiality of the token, whether of word or sentence form or larger rhetorical scheme, although a text may be notable for its ideas or particular subject matter as well. In doing so, such authors defy the idea that the relation between token and type is purely arbitrary. By implication, they deny that a book only hauls its passengers.

Words really haven't an independent life. They occupy no single location. They are foci for relations. The Pure Type may sit like a sage on its mountain top, pretending it is a Holy Thing, but the Language Type is dependent in great part upon the history of use that all its tokens have, for the oddity is that if the word is not the token, it is nevertheless the token which does the word's work.

If the word is an accretion formed from its history of use, then, when it scrapes against another word, it begins to shave the consequences of past times and frequent occasions from its companion as well as being shorn itself. We can imagine contexts that aim to reduce the ambiguous and rich vagueness of language and make each employed term mean and do one and only one thing. (Gertrude Stein says she aimed at this effect for a time, and insisted that when words were so primly used, they became nearly unrecognizable.) And there are certainly others whose hope is to employ the entire range of any word's possibilities, omitting not even its often forgotten roots (as Joyce does in *Finnegans Wake*). The same token can indeed serve many words, so that, while the word "steep," set down alongside the word "bank," will withdraw a few meanings from use, it may take an adjective like "muddy" to force the other "banks" to fail. Differentiation and determination are the goals of great writing: words so cemented in their sentential place they have no synonyms, terms so reduced to single tokens they lose their generality; they survive only where they are, the same size as their space, buried words like buried men:

> Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
> Sharp their spades, their muscles
> strong,
> They but thrust their buried men
> Back in the human mind again.

All our lines of language are like the rope in a tug of war. Their referential character pulls them one way, in the direction of things and the material world, where "buried men" are covered corpses, no otherwise than fossil bones, while the conceptual side of our sentences drags them toward a realm of abstraction, and considers them in their relation to other ideas: those, first of all, that define terms and tell us most matter-of-factly what it is to be buried, but only word for word; second, associations that have been picked up over time and use, like dust on travel clothes, and that shadow each essential sense to suggest, in this case, that death in one life is life in another; and, third, those connections our own memories make—for instance, if these lines remind us of a few of Edwin Muir's, and link us suddenly with a land frozen into flooring, a place whose planks are crossed, let's say, by a miller's daughter one cold winter's day, in another country and in another poem, and where the implications for the buried

are quite otherwise than those suggested by Yeats.

> But they, the powerless dead,
> Listening can hear no more
> Than a hard tapping on the sounding
> floor
> A little overhead
> Of common heels that do not know
> Whence they come or where they go
> And are content
> With their poor frozen life and shallow
> banishment.

Our own awareness, too, is always being drawn toward its objects, as if it were being sung to by sirens, at the same time that it's withdrawing, in the company of the cautious self-regarding self, into the safe citadel of the head—unless, of course desire is doing the driving, for then the same sensation that is sharply focused on the being of another (an exposed chest, a piece of moist cake) will find itself inside hunger's stomach.

These brief considerations should be sufficient to suggest that the word may be troubled by the same ontological problems that plagued Descartes (and all of us who inherited his hobbies): there are two poles to the person that are pulling the person apart, namely mind, meaning, and mathematics, inside the circle of the self; and body, spatial location, and mechanics, within the determined realm of things. A book is such a bodied mind. Descartes described these spheres (in the way, it seemed to him, accuracy required), as so separate, so alien from one another, indeed, as so opposed in every character and quality that we might naturally wonder how self and world could combine, meet, or merely hail one another, if they are at such ontological odds. And we have seen, as I have said, how bodylike the book is, how mindlike the text, and if Descartes's critics complained that he had made of us a ghost in a machine, we might now understand the text as thought slipped warmly between cold sheets, elusive as a spirit, since its message cannot be injured by ripping up its pages or destroyed by burning its book. Dog-earing can do no damage to the significance of the sign, according to the Cartesian division, nor can the cruel reader's highlight pen clarify obscurity, a check mark change a stress, an underline italicize a rhyme. This bifurcation of reality can be made persuasive, yet does our experience allow us to believe it?

Of course, we continue to call them copies, as if there were an exemplar still, and every book were but a vassal of its Lord, and Adam to its Maker. This medieval scheme is gone. There are no books copied piecemeal any more. Rather the book is an object of mass production, like a car (there is no first Ford), and both language and printing confer upon it a redoubtable generality to accompany its spiritual sameness. Like citizens in our country, all copies are truly equal, although this one, signed by the author, is somewhat more valuable, and this one, from the original edition, is to be preferred to all subsequent impressions, and this one, bound beautifully and illustrated by Picasso, is priceless (see, it's wrapped in tissue), and this one, dressed in vulgar colors and pretending to be a bosom not a book, like a whore flaunting its contents but ashamed of its center. Such a book asks to be received as nothing but an object, a commodity for learning or for leisure use, certainly not as a holy vessel, a container of consciousness, but instead as a disposable duplicate, a carbonless copy, another dollar bill, and not as a repository for moments of awareness, for passages of thought—states that, we prefer to believe, make us most distinctly us.

Descartes endeavored (it was a futile try) to find a meeting point for mind and matter, a place where they might transact some business, but consciousness could not be moored to a material mast like some dirigible, and his famous gland could not reside in both realms at once, or be a third thing, neither one nor t'other, not with realities so completely contrary. Yet if he had looked inside his *Cogito* instead of pursuing

its *ergo* to its *sum*, he would have found the simple, unassuming token, made of meaningless ink as its page is of flattened fibers, to which, in a formal yet relaxed way, was related both a referent in the world and a meaning in the mind. It was not that world; it was not that mind. Both had to happen along and find their union in the awareness of the reader.

Normally we are supposed to say farewell to the page even as we look, to see past the cut of the type, hear beyond the shape of the sound, feel more than the heft of the book, to hear the bird sing whose name has been invoked, and think of love being made through the length of the night, if the bird's name is the nightingale. But when the book itself has the beauty of the bird, and the words do their own singing; when the token is treated as if it, not some Divine intention, was holy and had power; when the bird itself is figured in the margins as though that whiteness were a moon-bleached bough and the nearby type the leaves it trembles; and when indigo turbans or vermilion feathers are, with jasmines, pictured so perfectly that touch falls in love with the finger, eyes light, and nostrils flare; when illustrations refuse to illustrate but suggest instead the inside of the reader's head where a consciousness is being constructed; then the nature of the simple sign is being vigorously denied, and the scene or line or brief rendition is being treated like a thing itself, returning the attention again and again to its qualities and its composition.

> If it's ever spring again,
>   Spring again,
> I shall go where went I when
> Down the moor-cock splashed, and
>   hen,
> Seeing me not, amid their flounder,
> Standing with my arm around her;
> If it's ever spring again,
>   Spring again,
> I shall go where went I then.

What is this as-if "if"? It is as if the tokens were rebelling against their simple dispensable utilitarian status; it is as if they were appealing to the meanings they ostensibly bear by saying, "Listen, hear how all of me helps you, for I won't let you merely declare your intention to return to a place and a time when you saw the moor-cock amorous with his hen and held your own love fast in tribute to him, but I shall insist that my very special music become meaning too, so that none of me, not a syllable of my substance, shall be left behind like an insignificant servant, because, as you can hear and see and feel, I am universal too, I am mind, and have ideal connections."

Yet it is only a long-standing philosophical prejudice to insist on the superiority of what are called the "higher" abstract general things, for they feel truly ghostly, orphaned, without even a heaven to make a shining mark on, and beseech the material world to give them a worthy home, a residence they may animate, and make worthwhile; they long to be something, to be someplace, to know the solidity and slow change of primal stuff, so they—these ideas, these designs—will rush into the arms of Thomas Hardy's lines, and instead of passing away into one realm or other, will remain and be repeated by us, revisited as the poet revisits that meadow full of springtime: "I shall go where went I when." Like a kite, the poem rises on the wind and longs to be off, yet the line holds, held by the page, pulling to be away, required to remain.

> Wandering through cold streets
>   tangled like old string,
> Coming on fountains rigid in the frost,
> Its formula escapes you; it has lost
> The certainty that constitutes a thing.

This stanza of Auden's describing "Brussels in Winter" discloses what rhymes do. They mate. They mate meanings on the basis of a common matter; on the basis of an accidental resemblance argue common

blood. Through this absurd connection, they then claim equivalent eloquence for the mute as for the vocal.

> Only the old, the hungry and the
> humbled
> Keep at this temperature a sense of
> place,
> And in their misery are all assembled;
> The winter holds them like an Opera-
> House.

Rows of words become the frozen scene, while the scene is but the sounds the syllables align.

> Ridges of rich apartments loom
> tonight
> Where isolated windows glow like
> farms,
> A phrase goes packed with meaning
> like a van,
>
> A look contains the history of man,
> And fifty francs will earn a stranger
> right
> To take the shuddering city in his arms.

Rhymes ball their signs like snow, then throw for fun the hard-packed contents of the fist at the unwary backside of a friend, who will nonetheless laugh when he receives the blow.

It was Emerson who wrote:

> He builded better than he knew;
> The conscious stone to beauty grew.

The stone is carved by the consciousness of the carver. That way consciousness achieves the dignity of place, and the stone overcomes its cold materiality and touches spirit.

The oscillation of interest between "thing" and "thought" inside the sign is complemented by a similar vibration in consciousness, inasmuch as we are eager to lose ourselves in our experience, enjoy what Nietzsche called a Dionysian drunkenness, and become one with what we know. But we are also anxious to withdraw, observe ourselves observing, and dwell in what Nietzsche said was a dream state, but I prefer to imagine is made of the play of the mind, an Apollonian detachment, the cool of the critical as it collects its thoughts within the theater of the head.

The book contains a text. A text is words, words, more words. But some books want to be otherwise than cup to coffee at the diner's anonymous counter. That's what I've so far said. They want to be persons, companions, old friends. And part of their personality naturally comes from use. The collector's copy, slipcased and virginal, touched with gloves, may be an object of cupidity, but not of love. I remember still a jelly stain upon the corner of an early page of *Treasure Island*. It became the feared black spot itself, and every time I reread that wonderful tale, I relived my first experience when, toast at a negligent tilt, I saw Blind Pew approaching, tapping down the road, and Billy Bones, in terror of what he might receive, holding out a transfixed hand. I licked the dab of jelly from the spotted page.

I scribbled many a youthfully assured "shit!" in my earliest books, questioning Pater's perspicacity, Spengler's personality, or Schopenhauer's gloom (even if marginally), but such silly defacements keep these volumes young, keep them paper playthings still, in their cheap series bindings and pocketbook colored covers, so that now they are treasures from a reading time when books were, like a prisoner's filched tin spoon, utensils of escape, enlargements of life, wonders of the world—more than companions, also healers, friends. One is built of such books, such hours of reading, adventures undertaken in the mind, lives held in reverential hands.

In a book bin at the back of a Goodwill store in St. Louis, I come upon a copy of *The Sense of Beauty*. By what route did Santayana's first work reach this place? We scarcely wonder what wallet has previously

enclosed the dollar bill we're on the brink of spending, but I for one get romantic about the vicissitudes of books' voyages, about hurt spines, dust, thumb prints on certain sheets, wear and tear, about top edges that have faded, and feel that some texts age like fine wine in their pages, waiting for the taste of the right eye, the best time. Pure texts have no such life. Only their tokens, and the books that keep them safe, wallow in the world.

Decorations did not always dirty the word by disgracing its depth and subtlety with lazy loops, silly leaves and flowers, poorly imagined scenes, or with characters as crudely drawn as most comics. Nor were banal texts invariably embarrassed by leather bindings, complex enclosing borders, and initial letters as elaborately tacky as a Christmas tree. The better matches were reminders of the Book's ideal: to realize within its covers a unity of type and token, the physical field supplying to its pastured words the nutrients they need to flourish, and actually making the text serve the design of a beautiful thing, while that object itself becomes something of a symbol, enlarging on the significance of the text and reminding the reader where his imagination belongs—on that page where "a phrase goes packed with meaning like a van."

If, then, the miseries of metaphysics are to be found in author, book, and reader, as well as in the whole unheeding world, and if, as its geometry suggests, a book is built to be, like a building, a body for the mind, we might usefully peer into that head where the text will sometime sound and see what elements need to be combined to complete its creation and its containment of a consciousness.

Clearly, the epistemological passage begins with the kind of awareness of the world and its regulations that the writer of our text achieves. When a thing is seen it says its name, and begs to be perceived as fully and richly as possible, because sensing of any kind transforms its innocent object, as Rilke so often wrote, into an item in consciousness: that stone jug, standing on a trestle table, gray as the wood, its lip white with dried milk, or the old mill whose long-stilled wheel showers every thought about it with the tossed fall of its working water, or the worn broom, dark with oil and dust, leaning now like a shadow in a corner, quietly concerned about who will take hold of it next, and bird call, of course, and the smell of anciently empty dresser drawers, the coarse comforting feel of dark bread between the teeth. Would any of these qualities be realized without the valiantly alert observer, dedicated to the metamorphosis of matter into mind, with the obligation to let nothing escape his life, never to let slip some character of things: the way wood wears at corners, or rust grows rich, or lamps stand on carpets?

Our ideal writer will naturally understand that experience is everywhere toned by our mood, soothed or inflamed by immediate feeling, and that these emotions are modified by what we see or think or imagine, so that sometimes new ones will emerge. I take an emotion to be a perception of the relation of the self to other things: fear or hate when they threaten me or mine, jealousy when I am faced with loss, envy when I wish I had someone else's talent, luck, or favor, love when I identify my own well-being with another's, then more generally, loneliness as a recognition that I am not sought or valued by my environment, alienation when I believe I have no real relation to the world, happiness when sufficiently deluded, melancholy when I see no possibility of improvement in my affairs, and so on. About these judgments a person may be correct or mistaken. And our ideal writer will be right about hers, able to empathize with those of others, and be adept at measuring how feeling deforms things or how

cannily it makes most of its assessments.

Thought is another essential character in consciousness, going on sometimes at a tangent to perception or in indifference to emotion (as philosophers like to brag it ought), though, if I am right about one of the functions of awareness, each and every element is cognitive; and it is a fortunate person, indeed, who has feelings the head trusts, and perceptions his other faculties can count on. I can feel persecuted and be deceived; I can see snakes, and be d.t.'d; I can believe in my project of squaring the circle, and be deluded; and we do know people who can't get anything right, who marry wrong, who embrace a superstition and call it faith, whose perceptions lack clarity, color, and depth, and who have never once heard the horn in the forest. Such a person might very well wish to possess the character of a good sentence.

For the most part, our formal thought goes on in words: in what we say to ourselves, in the sotto voce language I have already spoken of. Plainly a meditative person will need the data his perception furnishes and the support which sound emotions lend. But he will, in addition to the disciplines of logic, mathematics, and the scientific method, need to possess a rich vocabulary, considerable command of it, and the fruit (in facts and their relations, in words and theirs) of much skilled and careful reading, because reading is the main way we discover what is going on in others; it is the knothole in the fence, your sight of my secrets, my look at what has been hidden behind your eyes, since our organs are never shared, cannot be lent or borrowed. In order to be known, we speak. Even to ourselves.

We must notice our drives, our desires, our needs, next, although they are always calling attention to themselves. They put purpose in our behavior, position the body in the surf, urge us to overcome obstacles, or make hay while the sun shines. And whatever we desire, Hobbes says, we call good, and whatever we are fearful of and loathe, we insist is bad, avoiding it even if at cost. These are cognitions, too, and we discover, when we realize our aims, whether we were right to want to go home again, or were once more disappointed in the pie, the place, the conversation, and the trip.

Finally, in addition to our passions, purposes, and perceptions, the skills and deftness of our brains, there is what Coleridge called the "esemplastic power"—that of the creative imagination. As I am defining it, the imagination is comparative, a model maker, bringing this and that together to see how different they are, or how much the same. The imagination prefers interpenetration. That's its sex. It likes to look through one word at another, to see streets as tangled string, strings as sounding wires, wires as historically urgent words, urgent words as passing now along telephone lines, both brisk and intimate, strings that draw, on even an everyday sky, music's welcome staves.

Having read the classics closely, the inner self with honesty, and the world well—for they will be her principal referents—the writer must perform the second of our transformations: that of replacing her own complex awareness with its equivalence in words. That is, the sentence which gets set most rightly down will embody, in its languid turns and slow unfolding, or in its pell-mell pace and pulsing stresses, the imperatives of desire or the inertia of a need now replete; it will seize its subject as though it were its prey, or outline it like a lover, combining desire with devotion, in order to sense it superbly, neglecting nothing its nature needs; it will ponder it profoundly, not concealing its connections with thought and theory, in order to exhibit the play, the performance, of mind; and it will be gentle and contemplative, if that is called for, or passionate and rousing, if that's appropriate,

The Readers *(1924), by Fernand Léger*

always by managing the music, filling each syllable with significance like chocolates with creme, so that every sentence is a bit of mindsong and a fully animated body made of muscle movement, ink, and breath.

Last, as if we had asked Santa for nothing yet, the adequate sentence should be resonant with relations, raise itself like Lazarus though it lies still upon the page, as if—always "as if"—it rose from "frozen life and shallow banishment" to that place where Yeats's spade has put it "back in the human mind again."

How otherwise than action each is, for even if—always "even," always "if"—I preferred to pick the parsley from my potatoes with a knife, and eat my peas before all else, I should have to remember the right words must nevertheless be placed in their proper order: that is, parsley, potatoes, and peas . . . parsley, potatoes, and peas . . . parsley, potatoes, and peas.

That is to say, the consciousness contained in any text is not an actual functioning consciousness; it is a constructed one, improved, pared, paced, enriched by endless retrospection, irrelevancies removed, so that into the ideal awareness that I imagined for the poet, who possesses passion, perception, thought, imagination, and desire, and has them present in amounts appropriate to the circumstances—just as, in the lab, we need more observation than fervor, more imagination than lust—there are introduced patterns of disclosure, hierarchies of value, chains of inference, orders of images, na-

tures of things.

When Auden, to return to him, lullabies this way:

> Lay your sleeping head, my love,
> Human on my faithless arm;

he puts a most important pause—"my love"—between "head" and "human," allowing the latter to become a verb, and then, by means of an artfully odd arrangement, resting the *m*'s and *a*'s and *n*'s softly on the *a*'s and *m*'s and *r*'s.

Of course, we can imagine the poet with a young man's head asleep on an arm which the poet knows has cushioned other lovers equally well, and will again; and we can think of him, too, as considering how beautiful this youth is, and pondering the fleeting nature of his boyish beauty, its endangerment now calmly ignored:

> Time and fevers burn away
> Individual beauty from
> Thoughtful children, and the grave
> Proves the child ephemeral:
> But in my arms till break of day
> Let the living creature lie,
> Mortal, guilty, but to me
> The entirely beautiful.

Yet it is scarcely likely that Auden's contemplating mind ran on just this way, making in that very moment the pun on "lie," or creating that delicious doubled interior rhyme "but to me the entirely" which so perfectly confirms the sentiment. It's probable that the poet, passion spent, looked down on his lover in a simple song of sympathy. Later, he recalled his countless climbs into bed, in sadness at their passing, perhaps, but with a memory already resigned, recollecting, too, certain banal routines, in order, on some small notebook's handy page, to cause a consciousness to come to be that's more exquisite, more—yes—entire, and worthy of esteem, than any he actually ever had, or you, or me. What the poem says is not exceptional. This midnight moment will pass, this relationship will die, this boy's beauty will decay, the poet himself will betray his love and lie; but none of that fatal future should be permitted to spoil the purity of the poet's eye as it watches now, filled with "every human love." Nor can we compliment Auden's art by repeating Pope, that what it says has "ne'er so well been said," because that formula misses what has so beautifully been given us: a character and quality of apprehension.

Sentences, I've said, are but little shimmied lengths of words endeavoring to be similar stretches of human awareness. They are there to say I know this or that, feel thus and so, want what wants me, see the sea sweep swiftly up the sand and seep away out of sight as simply as these sibilants fade from the ear; but such sentences present themselves in ranks, in paginated quires, in signatures of strength; they bulk up in the very box that Cartesian geometry has contrived for them, to stand for the body that has such thoughts, such lines that illuminate a world, a world that is no longer their author's either, for the best of writing writes itself.

How wrong it is to put a placid pretty face upon a calm and tragic countenance. How awful also to ignore the essential character, the profounder functions, of the container of consciousness—to think of it even as a box from which words might be taken in or out—for I believe it is a crime against the mind to disgrace the nature of the book with ill-writ words of puffery or to compromise well-wrought words by building for them tawdry spaces in a tacky house. "The book form," Theodore Adorno writes,

> signifies detachment, concentration, continuity: anthropological characteristics that are dying out. The composition of a book as a volume is incompatible with its transformation into mo-

> mentary presentations of stimuli. When, through its appearance, the book casts off the last reminder of the idea of a text in which truth manifests itself, and instead yields to the primacy of ephemeral responses, the appearance turns against the book's essence, that which it announces prior to any specific context.... The newest books [have] become questionable, as though they have already passed away. They no longer have any self-confidence; they do not wish themselves well; they act as though no good could come of them.... The autonomy of the work, to which the writer must devote all his energies, is disavowed by the physical form of the work. If the book no longer has the courage of its own form, then the power that could justify that form is attacked within the book itself as well.

It remains for readers to realize the text, not only by reachieving the consciousness some works create (since not all books are bent on that result), but by appreciating the unity of book/body and book/mind that the best books bring about; by singing to themselves the large round lines they find, at the same time as they applaud their placement on the page, their rich surroundings, and everywhere the show of taste and care and good custom—what a cultivated life is supposed to provide; for if my meal is mistakenly scraped into the garbage, it becomes garbage, and if garbage is served to me on a platter of gold by hands in gloves, it merely results in a sardonic reminder of how little gold can do to rescue ruck when ruck can ruin whatever it rubs against. But if candlelight and glass go well together, and the linens please the eye as though it were a palate, and one's wit does not water the wine, if one's dinner companions are pleasing, if the centerpiece does not block the view, and its flowers are discreet about their scent, then whatever fine food is placed before us on an equally completed plate will be enhanced, will be, in such a context, only another able element in the making of a satisfactory whole; inasmuch as there is nothing in life better able to justify its follies, its inequities, and its pains (though there may be many its equal) than getting, at once, a number of fine things right; and when we read, too, with our temper entirely tuned to the text, we become—our heads—we become the best book of all, where the words are now played, and we are the page where they rest, and we are the hall where they are heard, and we are, by god, Blake, and our mind is moving in that moment as Sir Thomas Browne's about an urn, or Yeats's spaded grave; and death can't be so wrong, to be feared or sent away, the loss of love wept over, or our tragic acts continuously regretted, not when they prompt such lines, not when our rendering of them brings us together in a rare community of joy.