

Alan BENNETT (b. 1934), *The Uncommon Reader* (2007)

To begin with, it's true, she read with trepidation and some unease. The sheer endlessness of books outfaced her and she had no idea how to go on; there was no system to her reading, with one book leading to another, and often she had two or three on the go at the same time. The next stage had been when she started to make notes, after which she always read with a pencil in hand, not summarising what she read but simply transcribing passages that struck her. It was only after a year or so of reading and making notes that she tentatively ventured on the occasional thought of her own. 'I think of literature,' she wrote, 'as a vast country to the far borders of which I am journeying but cannot possibly reach. And I have started too late. I will never catch up.' Then (an unrelated thought): 'Etiquette may be bad but embarrassment is worse.'

There was sadness to her reading, too, and for the first time in her life she felt there was a good deal she had missed. She had been reading one of the several lives of Sylvia Plath and was actually quite happy to have missed most of that, but reading the memoirs of Lauren Bacall she could not help feeling that Ms Bacall had had a much better bite at the carrot and, slightly to her surprise, found herself envying her for it.

That the Queen could readily switch from showbiz autobiography to the last days of a suicidal poet might seem both incongruous and wanting in perception. But, certainly in her early days, to her all books were the same and, as with her subjects, she felt a duty to approach them without prejudice. For her, there was no such thing as an improving book. Books were uncharted country and, to begin with at any rate, she made no distinction between them. With time came discrimination, but apart from the occasional word from Norman, nobody told her what to read, and what not. Lauren Bacall, Winifred Holtby, Sylvia Plath – who were they? Only by reading could she find out.

It was a few weeks later that she looked up from her book and said to Norman: 'Do you know that I said you were my amanuensis? Well, I've discovered what I am. I am an opsimath.'

With the dictionary always to hand, Norman read out: 'Opsimath: one who learns only late in life.'

It was this sense of making up for lost time that made her read with such rapidity and in the process now adding more frequent (and more confident) comments of her own, bringing to what was in effect literary criticism the same forthrightness with which

she tackled other departments of her life. She was not a gentle reader and often wished authors were around so that she could take them to task.

‘Am I alone,’ she wrote, ‘in wanting to give Henry James a good talking-to?’

‘I can see why Dr Johnson is well thought of, but surely, much of it is opinionated rubbish?’ 35

It was Henry James she was reading one teatime when she said out loud, ‘Oh, do get on.’

The maid, who was just taking away the tea trolley, said, ‘Sorry, ma’am,’ and shot out of the room in two seconds flat. 40

‘Not you, Alice,’ the Queen called after her, even going to the door. ‘Not you.’

Previously she wouldn’t have cared what the maid thought or that she might have hurt her feelings, only now she did and coming back to the chair she wondered why. That this access of consideration might have something to do with books and even with the perpetually irritating Henry James did not at that moment occur to her. 45

Though the awareness of all the catching up she had to do never left her, her other regret was to do with all the famous authors she could have met but hadn’t. In this respect at least she could mend her ways and she decided, partly at Norman’s urging, that it would be interesting and even fun to meet some of the authors they had both been reading. Accordingly a reception was arranged, or a soirée, as Norman insisted on calling it. 50

The equerries naturally expected that the same form would apply as at the garden parties and other large receptions, with tipping off of guests to whom Her Majesty was likely to stop and talk. The Queen, though, thought that on this occasion such formality was misplaced (these were artists after all) and decided to take pot luck. This turned out not to be a good idea. 55

Shy and even timid though authors generally seemed to be when she had met them individually, taken together they were loud, gossipy and, though they laughed a good deal, not, so far as she could tell, particularly funny. She found herself hovering on the edge of groups, with no one making much effort to include her, so that she felt like a guest at her own party. And when she did speak she either killed conversation and plunged it into an awful pause or the authors, presumably to demonstrate their independence and sophistication, took no notice at all of what she said and just went on talking. 60

It was exciting to be with writers she had come to think of as friends and whom she longed to know. But now, when she was aching to declare her fellow feeling with those whose books she had read and admired, she found she had nothing to say. She, who had seldom in her life been intimidated by anyone, now found herself tongue-tied and awkward. ‘I adored your book,’ would have said it all, but fifty years of composure and self-possession plus half a century of understatement stood in the way. Hard put for conversation, she found herself falling back on some of her stock stand-bys. It wasn’t 70

quite ‘How far did you have to come?’ but their literary equivalent. ‘How do you think of your characters? Do you work regular hours? Do you use a word-processor? – questions which she knew were clichés and were embarrassing to inflict had the awkward silence not been worse.

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One Scottish author was particularly alarming. Asked where his inspiration came from, he said fiercely: ‘It doesn’t come, Your Majesty. You have to go out and fetch it.’

When she did manage to express – and almost stammer – her admiration, hoping the author would tell her how he (the men, she decided, much worse than the women) had come to write the book in question, she found her enthusiasm brushed aside, as he insisted on talking not about the bestseller he had just written but about the one on which he was currently at work and how slowly it was going and how in consequence, as he sipped his champagne, he was the most miserable of creatures.

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Authors, she soon decided, were probably best met with in the pages of their novels, and were as much creatures of the reader’s imagination as the characters in their books. Nor did they seem to think one had done them a kindness by reading their writings. Rather they had done one the kindness by writing them.

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To begin with she had thought she might hold such gatherings on a regular basis, but this soirée was enough to disabuse her of that. Once was enough. This came as a relief to Sir Kevin, who had not been enthusiastic, pointing out that if ma’am held an evening for the writers she would then have to hold a similar evening for the artists, and having held an evening for writers and artists the scientists would then expect to be entertained, too.

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‘Ma’am must not be seen to be partial.’

Well, there was now no danger of that.

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Preface to the 1603 edition of
Basilikon Doron, or His Maiesties Instructions to His Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince. (First published in 1599)

CHARITABLE Reader; it is one of the golden Sentences, which Christ our Saviour vttered to his Apostles, that there *is nothing so couered, that shall not be reuealed, neither so hidde, that shall not be knowen; and whatsoeuer they haue spoken in darkenesse, should be heard in the light: and that which they had spoken in the eare in secret place, should be publikely preached on the tops of the houses:* [Luk. 12] 5
And since he hath said it, most trew must it be, since the authour thereof is the fountaine and very being of trewth: which should mooue all godly and honest men, to be very warie in all their secretest actions, and whatsoeuer middesses they vse for attaining to their most wished ends; lest otherwise how auowable soeuer that the marke be, whereat they aime, the middesses being discouered to be shamefull 10
whereby they climbe, it may turne to the disgrace both of the good worke it selfe, and of the author thereof; since the deepest of our secrets, cannot be hidde from that all-seeing eye, and penetrant light, piercing through the bowels of very darkenesse it selfe.

But as this is generally trew in the actions of all men, so is it more specially trew 15
in the affaires of Kings: for Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authority, are as it were set (as it was said of old) vpon a publike stage, in the sight of all the people; where all the beholders eyes are attentively bent to looke and pry in the least circumstance of their secretest drifts: Which should make Kings the more carefull not to harbour the secretest thought in their minde, but such as in the 20
owne time they shall not be ashamed openly to auouch, assuring themselves, that Time the mother of Veritie will in the due season bring her owne daughter to perfection.

The trew practise hereof, I have as a King oft found in my owne person, though I thanke God, neuer to my shame, having laide my count, euer to walke in the eyes of 25
the Almightye, examining euer so the secretest of my drifts, before I gave them course, as how they might some day bide the touchstone of a publike triall. And amongst the rest of my secret actions, which haue (vnlooked for of me) come to publike knowledge, it hath so fared with my BASILIKON DORON, directed, to my eldest son; which I wrote for exercise of mine owne ingyne, and instruction of him, 30
who is appointed by God (I hope) to sit on my Throne after me: For the purpose and matter thereof being onely fit for a King, as teaching him his office; and the person whom for it was ordained, as Kings heire, whose secret counsellor and faithfull admonisher it must be, I thought it no wayes conuenient nor comely, that either it should to all be proclaimed, which to one onely appertained (and specially being a 35

messenger betwixt two so coniunct persons) or yet that the mould whereupon he should frame his future behaiour, when hee comes both vnto the perfection of his yeeres, and possession of his inheritance, should before the hand be made common to the people, the subiect of his future happy gouernment. And therefore for the more secret and close keeping of them, I onely permitted seuen of them to be printed, the 40 Printer being first sworne for secrecie: and these seuen I dispersed amongst some of my trustieft seruants, to be kepted closely by them, lest in case by the iniquitie or wearing of time, any of them might haue beene lost, yet some of them might haue remained after me, as witnesses to my Sonne, both of the honest integritie of my heart, and of my fatherly affection and naturall care towards him. 45

But since contrary to my intention and expectation, as I haue alreadie said, this Booke is now vented, and set foorth to the publike view of the world, and consequently subiect to every mans censure, as the current of his affection leades him; I am now forced, as well for resisting to the malice of the children of enuie, who like waspes sucke venome out of every wholesome herbe; as for the satisfaction of the 50 godly honest sort, in any thing that they may mistake therein, both to publish and spread the true copies thereof, for defacing of the false copies that are alreadie spread, as I am enformed; as likewise by this Preface, to cleare such parts thereof, as in respect of the concised shortnesse of my Style, may be mis-interpreted therein.

James Abbott McNeill WHISTLER (1834-1903)

Reading by Lamplight (1858), 119 x 161 mm

Etching and dry point on Japanese paper, The Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge)

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