WHAT IS A BOOK?

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It is our tradition that the first lecture of the year should be dedicated to our freshmen. They have newly joined a community whose program of learning centers on the scheduled reading of a pre-set list of books and on the twice-weekly discussion which takes place in the seminar. They have come to us chiefly because that is what we do here. I have read each of their applications, and I can vouch for the fact.

Then what sort of impression will I be making on them if I ask an absurd question like "What is a book?" — and in public? Don't we, known to the world as a Great Books College, know what a book is, even what a great book is?

I was friends once with a little boy (we are still friends, but he is a big strapping lawyer now, a public defender, no less) who told me he was making a rocket to send into space. In the proper adult spirit of annoying little children I asked him "What do you mean, space?" He looked at me in big-eyed amazement (he was used to grown-ups having more answers than he had questions) and said incredulously; "Don't you even know what space is — you know, *outer* space?" So don't I even know what a book is, a *great* book?

Well, I do and I don't. I don't say that to create confusion. Contrary to what some of your upperclass colleagues may try to tell you, confusion is *not* our business, but rather clarification, among other things because clear-headedness is one condition of open-mindedness. A slowly developing, limited clarity of mind does seem to me to be our business.

Nor, for that matter, is reading books our primary activity, or even thinking about them. Our primary purpose is, in my opinion — I say "in my opinion" because not everyone agrees — to *reflect*, which means literally "to bend (our thought) back" — on itself and on ourselves. When you leave us in four years you may well have chosen a career. The word "career" is related to "car" and connotes taking off on a track, straight, speedy — and upward, we hope. The years immediately before you are, on the contrary, years of leisure, of slow progress in a rising circle (such as is called a spiral), of reviewing your points of origin —

one of which is yourself — from different vantage points. It is significant that we never ask you to "take a course" but always to "be in a tutorial." We invite you not to course along a set track of organized knowledge, but to be active in a community protective of learning wherever it goes, even in circles. That, incidentally, is why your teachers are not called professors but tutors. These are both Latin words. A professor is "one who speaks out assertively in public," but a tutor is "one who safeguards and watches" over things. A tutorial, then is a safe haven for learning with fifteen or so members, one of whom is the special guardian of learning.

It is often said that there is yet another presence in the tutorial or the seminar, the one that brings us together, the true guide and teacher, namely the great book being studied. We often say that, and I think it is true. Not for nothing does our college seal display seven books.

Let me take out a minute here for an interjection. You may be surprised by my vehemence, but I want to warn you of what seems to me a very bad blight. Countries, congregations, colleges — all have their verities, truths they keep telling about themselves. When a truth has been told and heard very often, it loses, by a very natural process, its sap and its savor. Then there is a type of person who concludes that because the truth has lost its savor for them, it is unsavory, and they affect ennui and disdain toward it. They think the truth is flat and falsified when it is their souls that have gone flaccid. I am not speaking of those who vigorously oppose the truthfulness of the truth: They are the tonic that keeps truths healthy. I am speaking of people — ourselves in certain moods — who let the soul slip from the words they speak and then blame the words. The cure for this condition seems to be to cultivate the habit of reverence. By reverence I here mean the disposition to grant at least provisional significance to words and sayings from which the meaning seems for the moment to have withdrawn and to

have become remote. The next step is then the effort to recover that meaning.

In that spirit I say that great books *are* our teachers, and this lecture is one attempt to recall the meaning of this truism.

There is a man — you will spend much of your year arguing with him — who intimates that it is foolish to talk about the quality and purpose of a thing before asking what it is. In the manner of this man Socrates let me then put my title question, to which we all know some obvious answers that turn increasingly unobvious under reflection: What is a book?

Books as Bodies

A book appears to be, to begin with, a bodily thing. In an old college film, which I hope you get to see sometime, there is a dorm sequence of a student shouting upstairs to her friend: "Throw me down my *Iliad.*" Down comes the *Iliad.* Or it might have been her *Paradise Lost,* I've forgotten. Is the *Iliad* then a thing subject to gravity, gaining distance as the square of the time? Is it *her* Iliad or Homer's Iliad or Achilles' Iliad? Where is the place of this Iliad? In a book, in the rhapsode's literal line-by-line memory, in the student's impressionistic memory, nowhere, in Troy, in Hades? I say Hades, because as you will soon read in the *Odyssey,* it is to the blood-drained invisible underworld that you must go to learn the great tales on which poetry works. Again, when is a book's time of being? When the story called the Iliad happened, in the twelfth century B.C.? When it was told, in the eight century B.C.? When an Athenian commission first produced an official written version in the sixth century B.C.? Or whenever Johnnies read their seminar in the twentieth century, or, for that matter, in 1808 when the freshmen of this college (then called the "noviate class") first read Homer — in Greek? (T. F. Tilghman, *The Early History of St. John's College in Annapolis,* p. 36). Or whenever Homer's poem is at work influencing lives, as the vision of Achilles once, in the fourth century B.C., drove Alexander the Great to the deeds that made him so?

Or whenever the Iliad stands on a shelf waiting to be opened? In that most thought-provoking of children's books, Michael Ende's *Neverending Story,* the boy Sebastian, about to open the magical book he has stolen, says to himself:

> I would like to know what actually goes on in a book as long as it's closed. . . . One has to read it to experience it, that's clear. But it's already there beforehand. I would like to know, how?

These are tricky perplexities that push themselves forward when you approach this book-thing with questions such as: whose possession, in what place, at what time? Let me nonetheless stick for a while with the crudest set of solutions, those that take a book as a physical object.

Paul Scott, the author of the *Raj Quartet*, the work I think of as the most considerable novel of the time between the Second World War and our present, was much impressed by the following prosaic account of what it is to be a book:

> A small hard rectangular object, whose pages are bound along one edge into fixed covers and numbered consecutively.
> (*On Writing and the Novel*, p. 211, quoting Bergonzi).

As I flesh out this bare-bones definition of a bound paper book, do, please, compare what it means to read such a book with the unrolling of a papyrus scroll on the one hand, and the scrolling of a computer display on the other.

Books, says the passage, are small and hard, which means they are safely carried hither and thither and can even be thrown down the stairwell. As sophomores you will read Augustine's autobiography in which he confesses first his life of sin and finally his conversion to faith. He tells how his landlord let him use the garden of the house Augustine was renting, and there he and his friend one day carried a book, or *codex*, as Augustine calls it, which means a set of wooden tablets, a sort of proto-book. It was not just any book, but a *codex apostoli*. It was a part of the *The Book, to biblion*, in English, the Bible. (Let me take out a minute to say that the Greek word *biblion* means a thing made of *biblos*, which is the word for papyrus, while papyrus itself comes into English as paper.)

Augustine was, at that time, in great agony over his sins and his doubts. Suddenly, in the garden, he heard a child's voice saying over and over in a sing-song voice: "*Tolle lege, tolle lege*," "Take it and read it, take it and read it." So he took the book and read what he found, and at that moment it was, as he says in his beautiful Latin:

Quasi luce securitas infusa cordi mea, omnes dubitationes tenebrae diffugerunt (*Confessions* VIII, 12).

"As if a light of assurance had poured into my heart, all the shadows of doubt fled away." If the book had not been in the garden there might have been no voice, or if there had been a voice, Augustine would not have heeded it, or if he had heeded it, he would have had nothing to take up and read. And he would have missed the moment that made him, his conversion. It is because books are portable that the ready reader can sometimes come on the word fitly spoken

To descend from the solemn to the ordinary: The bound paper book can be carried about more conveniently than can most other containers of valuables except wallets: in a pocket, handgrip or knapsack, to bed, bathroom, beach or waiting room. How many of you spent months in high school carrying around a book until the time was ripe, and you took it and read it?

Besides being small and hard, the book of the definition is normally rectangular. Its rectangularity betokens the self-effacement of the visible lay-out of the text. Let me explain.

There is something called pattern poetry. An example is the Mouse's sad Tale in *Alice in Wonderland*, which looks like what it sounds like, a tail. You see here only the tail end of the tale:

'Such a
trial
dear sir,
With no
jury or
judge,
would be
wasting
our breath.'
'I'll be
judge,
I'll be
jury,'
Said
cunning
old Fury:
'I'll try
the whole
cause,
and
condemn
you
to
death.'

This sort of innocent typographical game, a kind of printed calligraphy, has, I should tell you, recently been used as a jumping off place for grave reflections on the latest of intellectual revolutions. A famous French intellectual has said:

> Thus the calligram aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.
> (Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, p. 21).

The traditional book, it is true, suppresses the looking in favor of the reading. It is rectangular because it breaks the narrative into optically convenient and semantically arbitrary stacks of lines. In some traditions these are arranged horizontally, in some, like the Chinese and Japanese, vertically; some are read from left to right, and some like Hebrew, from right to left so that the book begins where an English book ends. The earliest Greek writing is sometimes read back and forth, which is called *boustrophedon*, meaning ox-turning, as in plowing. I am sure that all these conventions carry significance with them. For instance the fact that Western reader's eyes survey the page in the plane of the horizon back and forth, while Oriental readers nod vertically — there must be some meaning in that.

Next, Scott's quotation says that the pages of a book are numbered consecutively. This pagination is, so to speak, the street address of the narrative. That address system makes it possible to revisit locations in a book. For worthy books are meant to be read in a double way, so that the first reading is somehow already the second reading. One way is to follow the stacks of lines and the sequence of pages straight through. Of course, while we are barging on with the inexorable clock — say it is 6:30 on a seminar night — the time of the narrative warps back and forth. For example, the centerpiece of the *Odyssey*, Books IX-XII where Odysseus turns poet and tells of the ten years when he seemed lost to the world, is all flashback; it is only with Book XIII that we return to the present of the story.

But there is a second way to scramble the time of reading. It is made possible by the fact that a book is a bound stack of numbered pages. That means you can put slips of paper or fingers in the pages you have passed. As a visible, weighty, numbered thing, a book is all there at once, and we can treat all its tale or argument as simultaneously accessible.

Literary theorists have in fact invented a word for the writing that fully exploits the non-linear property of the book format. They call it "spatial" prose. (J. Frank in *Spatial Form in Narrative*, 1977.) It is spatial because it depends on continual back-reference, on always holding the text present, as if it were all there simultaneously just as space is — while time is always either gone or yet to come. It seems to me that the physical format of the bound book invites the writer to make spatialist demands on the reader. That does not mean that authors who may not have been writers at all, like Homer, or who wrote in scrolls that show only one place at a time, did not compose spatially: All great texts demand continual back- reference, but book texts make it mechanically easier. The theorists I have mentioned thought that the so-called "Modernist" writers, above all James Joyce, were peculiarly spatial, but you will see that every Platonic dialogue (for example) requires you to refer back all the time — a demand which you cannot, of course, fully meet until you have studied your way through the text once. We might conjecture, on the other hand, that a people that values time and its sacred cyclical order might keep its scripture in scrolls, as do the Jews their Torah.

The other place where events that are strung out in time are kept simultaneous is memory. A book is indeed a memory analogue: an external memory. This seems to me a wonderful thing.

The last dialogue and the last book you will read this year — in May when all reading is a drag — is called the *Phaedrus*. In it Socrates will claim that any written text is pernicious because it can't answer back when questioned, and also because it acts as a pharmaceutical pacifier: It keeps you passively reminded and prevents you from being actively mindful (275). Readers of dialogues might point out to Socrates that the texts in which he appears do answer back, and readers of books might say that a paginated book does keep us actively casting back and forth.

Finally, a book, in Paul Scott's quotation, is bound along one edge between fixed covers. This physical fact means that books have spines; they are upright vertebrates. They normally stand on shelves next to one another. (I can't help telling you that in my private library at home only the books I respect stand up; the indifferent ones have to lie prone on the top shelves.) Only the spine shows, so a book is known by its backbone. That fact in turn means that a book is identified by author and title. In antiquity titles were evidently not always given by the author. Who knows whether Homer would have called his song about

the wrath of Achilles after the name of Hector's city? Or what Aristotle would have called his lectures on being, later called by the ambiguous title *Metaphysics*, meaning either "the book that follows the *Physics*" or "the subject matter beyond nature"?

In modern times, on the other hand, titles are almost always carefully crafted announcements of the author's intention, and they are the first thing to think about as soon as you have finished the book once. Some titles reveal, some retract, some complement the contents of the book. For example, as a rising senior you will spend a glorious summer with Tolstoy's fourteen hundred page novel entitled *War and Peace*, of which 1340 are devoted to war and sixty to peace. What did Tolstoy mean by his title? Did he mean that those last pages of peaceful family life, the so-called First Epilogue, have as much gravity, as much cosmic significance, as all the turmoil that went before? I think so, but you may find that your seminar divides around that question, which is made more interesting by the fact that the Russian word for "peace" also means "world."

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That concludes my unpacking of the definition of a book as a small hard rectangular object, made of paginated leaves bound along one edge. So far the answer to the question "What is a book?" has amounted to this: A book is the kind of artifact we call a medium. It is made to mediate a text to us.

In his *Physics* Aristotle will observe a fundamental two-foldness in the human world. Some things in it grow, or at least move by themselves, and these, he says, are natures. Other things are made by a human being out of some material according to a plan, and these we call artifacts. (I might say, incidentally, that one of our modern perplexities is our capability for turning natures into artifacts.) Now to figure out what a natural being or what a given artifact truly is — a house, a marble image, a tool — is complicated enough. But to think about the kind of artifact called a medium requires special subtlety. For a medium is meant to come between the receiver and the source in such a way as to convey a message while being itself overlooked. Telescopes, telephones, television sets, whose names mean respectively things for scanning objects that are far off, for hearing voices that are far off, for seeing images produced far off, are not the focus of the user's interest when they are transmitting, and go dead or empty when not in use. But

as the book is not a medium that plays or replays some performance far off in space or even in time, so it is not like a tape or disk that goes inactive after it's been played. Sebastian's question, What goes on inside a book when it is closed?, is not purely phantastic; even an unread book seems to have a sort of secret vitality just because its text is all latent significance — imageless squiggles. I ask the seniors if there has been a single seminar book in your three years here that would gain very much from being illustrated. The solemn last paragraph of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* speaks of Spirit in time as presenting a languidly moving "gallery of pictures." Ask yourselves, when you come to it, whether you would wish someone to take Hegel at his word and to produce an illustrated *Phenomenology.*

In the image-smashing disturbances of late antiquity, the iconoclastic opposition to depictions of God and Christ was countered by the notion of a "Pauper's Bible." Religious images, the iconophiles argued, are scripture for the illiterate. Perhaps they should have conceded that for those who can "take up and read" the written word is antagonistic to depiction because pictures fix the narrative in its flow, specify its intimations to the imagination, and rivet the eye on the page. In short, illustrations turn a book from a medium into a presentation. They capture the imagination and thereby drain the word.

I have only mentioned book-illustrations to set off the peculiar wonder of the verbal book as a medium-body, a medium that harbors its content without presenting it — I mean, as I said before, that we are not caught by images, and we read right past the print presented on the page. To me there is something elusive and mysterious about this unpresented yet ever-present life of books which makes the question what happens within them permissible and plausible. Of course, I am too much of a coward seriously to propose that arguments go on developing and characters go on conversing all over my library — and yet! And yet — they do seem to have done just that from reading to reading. The mystery here is that of mental life encased in a hard rectangular object.

A book, then, is a peculiar kind of medium, a medium not unlike a vessel of the spirit — that is what makes it understandable that people might kiss a book or swear on it or carry it always along. Yet although it is a peculiar medium, it is still a medium. Being a medium means that it mediates between senders and receivers, in this case, between the writers and the readers. Let me start with the readers, since that is what we are — and there are, thank heaven, more of us than of them.

Readers as God-Parents

I call this section of the lecture "Readers as God-Parents" because I will later liken writers to parents. A god-parent is the sponsor of a rite of spiritual regeneration; a reader sponsors the rebirth of the book-body's soul. The first step toward this revival is, of course, to turn the spatially all-present text back into real, live, passing time.

There are many perplexities and complications to the conscious reading of a book. The study of these problems is called "hermeneutics," named after Hermes, the god of messages. It seems to me far more important to read books than to engage in this study. I once offered a preceptorial on it which left us all unclear whether anyone could in fact read a book. Let me proceed on the sensible hypothesis that books are readable.

Then the first practical observation to be made is that there are different kinds of books, and that they should be read differently. It would be plain eccentric not to quote from Frances Bacon's essay "Of Studies" here:

> Some Books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; That is, some Books are to be read only in parts; others to be read but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

Let me give you examples. Some people will be outraged right away and that was part of my pleasure in writing this lecture.

1. Mysteries. When you are about to invest a portion of your life in reading one — on the hypothesis that you will get to be eighty and that it takes three hours to read the mystery, that would be .0000042 of your life, but these things add up — do the following. Turn to the denouement and find out whodunnit. If you still care to read the book, start at the beginning. Otherwise, forget it.

2. Scholarship. Read the preface. If it is clear what will be proved and why, go on. Otherwise, forget it.

3. Minor novels. Apply the *sortes Biblicae*, an old mode of reading. *Sortes* is a Latin word for "chances." "The chance of the Bible" is exactly what Augustine was bidden to take when he was told to "take up and read." If the passages you find at random are entrancing, begin at the beginning. Otherwise, forget it.

Notice that these kinds of books are not the ones you will read for seminar, though it is true that one of the novels on our list is, among other things, also a murder mystery — Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*; however it is scarcely a minor novel.

Notice also that the books we do read for seminar all have one thing in common: None that I can think of has an index, at least not one made by the author. Why do great books have no index? Because you are bidden to read them whole and as a whole at least once, from their pregnant beginning to their well-delivered end. Because you are not to look up subjects that interest you or follow through topics you specialize in. Because understanding is not an encapsulated result but a way, the way through the book. Because a book of stature, be it philosophy or fiction, is not about — round-and-about — something, but is *the* presentation of a matter most adequate to it in the author's judgment. (I might say, incidentally, that Hegel gives similar reasons for arguing, in the long and famous Preface to his *Phenomenology*, that prefaces are impossible.)

When you are reading a book for the second time you may want to do the following to the text, provided you own the book bodily. You may want to take a marker of the color children use when they draw the sun, and highlight passages. How is highlighting compatible with reading the whole well? It seems to me to be permissible for four reasons:

1. Some writers occasionally stop to put their whole meaning in a *nutshell.* Whether you have come on such a nugget, you cannot really know until you have read the whole book. If you mark such a nutshell for yourself, then when you come on it you can crack it and re-develop for yourself the argument, which grows as an oak from this acorn. An example of such an acorn is Kant's epigram, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B75): "Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind." Whenever you recall that sentence, you can recover the whole *Critique* for yourself.

2. Often you will notice, some time into the book, that a *motif* keeps recurring and that you must at some point collect its incidences and figure out its meaning. An example is the returning vision of large blueness in *War and Peace.*

3. A third case of occurrences inviting highlighting is the *significant mystery.* A book will say things that you don't yet understand, that are pregnant enigmas for you, and that you want to talk about in seminar. One example for me is the second half of the fourth line of the *Iliad*:

> . . . Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή
> . . . Dios d'eteleieto boule
> . . . and the plan of Zeus was fulfilled.

What plan? When fulfilled? That is the puzzle dominating the epic.

4. Last among the occasions for highlighting I can think of, are the passages of *personal import* — those that penetrate to your heart and that you want never to lose, the ones you keep to yourself or show to close friends. I won't give an example now, but I will tell some, if asked.

Let me say again: Highlighting, whether in sky-blue ink or in sun-yellow marker, is for the second reading. I think that though the books may look defaced when you are finished, the writers are rejoicing in your reading of them, be they still on earth or in either of the other places. That brings me to the author.

Writers as Parents

We speak of "Homer's gods." "Homer's gods," we might say, "are frivolous creatures — just compare the lightness of their invulnerable immortality to the gravity of his death-expectant heroes." Homer's gods, Homer's heroes, Homer's *Iliad*: How is the author related to the book? *Auctor* means literally "progenitor, parent." And like a child, the book goes forth into the world, sometimes falling into hands the parent may shudder at.

But like a good parent, the author knew that this would happen and gave the offspring what it needs in order to be on its own: self-sufficiency, a certain repleteness. Here is what I mean.

In the course of the year you will be writing at least five small papers in your language tutorial and several more in your other classes. On some of these you will have conferences with your tutors. Your tutor will ask: "What are you saying here, what did you have in mind?" And you will tell all the things that you thought but failed to say in your paper. That is what distinguishes an accomplished writer: the ability to make the book independent, to turn it loose, to find a way to get the reader to ask not "What was the author thinking?" but "What is the book saying?" Annie Dillard, a very fine contemporary writer, who has thought much about composing a book, says in her essay *The Writing Life* (p. 4): "Process is nothing; erase your tracks." She is attacking a current school of writing teachers who exalt process over product, writing exercises over perfected expression. Here you will almost never be asked to write merely for the sake of writing. We take a leaf, so to speak, from the books of real writers and ask you to think about a matter that really does make you think, and then to say on paper, as perfectly as possible, what you have thought. That is what the authors of our books have done — they have thought and found the right words. "Thought" is a noun, but it is also the past form of the verb "to think." Thought is thinking that has been done, thinking perfected. So Annie Dillard should not have said "Erase your tracks" but "Absorb your tracks; make your product point the reader to your tracks." For writing is thinking frozen in its tracks by speech, speech crystallized so as to make the point of origin visible within. A book is a translucent product containing its process. That is how Homer's *Iliad* can become our Iliad. It preserves within it the world that Homer meant with each word he said. (Incidentally, it is because we want you to write papers somewhat as real writers write them — first think, then say — that you will have such a devilish hard time writing, but at least the task will dignify rather than degrade you.)

So no more than we ask your parents what they meant by producing you, need we ask what Homer meant in his epics. The off-spring in both cases are amply provided to speak for themselves. Or rather, you are amply provided to read it. Even the Iliad, the one that is not a material thing to own, is yours, the reader's. You bring it to life, melt its frozen state. Again I quote from Bacon, this time from his *Advancement of Learning* (Bk.I):

> But the images of men's wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time, and capable of

> perpetual renovation. Neither are they fitly to be called images, because they generate still, and cast their seed in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages: so that, if the invention of the ship was thought so noble, which carrieth riches and commodities from place to place, and consociateth the most remote regions in participation of their fruits, how much more are letters to be magnified, which, as ships, pass through the vast sea of time, and make ages so distant to participate of the wisdom, illuminations, and inventions the one of the other?

Now the notion that *you* bring the book to life seems to be close to the claim of a currently very busy school of thought: that the reader is the author. But what I mean is in fact a world apart from the notion that you may tease the text into any meaning your brilliant wit devises.

On the contrary: It is the book's will, not yours that is to be done. There is a book by Joseph Conrad (whose novella "The Heart of Darkness," to my mind the greatest short story of our century, you will read as seniors). The book is called *The Mirror of the Sea.* It tells of the difference between going to sea in sailing vessels and on steam boats. A steam boat plows through the water; it conquers the ocean. Its progress is mechanical, though its route is wilful. The sail ship on the other hand respects its element and responds to its every indication. From departure to landfall, it is engaged in a fierce and loving battle with the sea. Its course is contingent and its arrival uncertain. A great writer, to extend Bacon's nautical figure, provides a book that is more like a sea for sailing than an ocean for steaming.

And that brings me to my final reflection, on the greatness of books. Before I finish let me say that I know full well that I have been speaking in similes and metaphors and that I expect to be held to a more literal account in the question period.

Greatness in Books

St. John's is known as a "Great Books College," and, as I said early on, I know from your applications that you came because you want to read books that raise you rather than demean you.

Mr. Curtis Wilson, a retired tutor who was twice dean of the college, used to wish that we would stop talking of "the hundred great books," and instead speak of "some very good books." I agree with "some," but, though I see his point — greatness is not a very sensible sort of classification — I can't quite agree to dropping "great," not at this moment in America.

To begin with, I want to prognosticate that the more books you read, the more you will find that there *is* greatness, that it is an emergent quality that some books just have, and that each reading confirms. The community that has in common the reading of these books and the acknowledgment of their greatness is bound by two powerful bonds: first, the fact of a shared judgment, competently come by and continually confirmed, and second the fact of a practical willingness to reverence what is high as expressed in a daily schedule of study.

Some of you may know that nowadays these are fighting words in academe. How, they ask, can any communal judgment have been fairly arrived at when we are a people divided by a diversity of hopelessly opposed interests — who are playing, as they say, a zero sum game? How, again, can any one human expression be higher than another, when every text is a testimonial to some human condition, and the tradition of chosen books merely represents the winner?

In other words, the present trend is to want democracy without commonality and equality without excellence. To me the wish seems outrageous — and again I am yours to question in the question period — but doubly outrageous because it contains the seed of a fair dream. The fair dream is that the human being in us should be universally respected and that all our works should be universally appreciated. The forced version is that we should live in a society in which, without admitting a common humanity, every last group discrimination based on extrinsic properties, such as race and sex, is outlawed, while all intellectual discriminations based on intrinsic criteria of quality are proscribed as having ulterior motives.

Let me offer two rules for choosing books to read that take some account of what is fair in the desire for universal appreciation.

Here is Law One of the Discriminating Reader: Devour everything you can swallow with relish, indiscriminately. Test texts as I recommended before, but give everything a try. There are dozens of wonderful genres and fine works within them: Science fiction, utopias and fanstasy; children's, ethnic and women's literature; Westerns, adventures and thrillers, book reviews, political flyers and literary criticism. (If you come to see me in my office I will be delighted to tell you my loves and hates in each category. I also know a lot of rather pleasing trash, including comic books.)

Law Two of the Discriminating Reader then goes as follows: Read only a limited number of books, perhaps a hundred and twenty or so; discriminate severely; while attending to a text allow a little voice on the sidelines to say: "This is great and worthy of my best time; that is not."

Far from being at odds, Law One and Law Two are complementary. Obeying the first shows you to be a lover of books, a bibliophile; obeying the second makes you a student, a reader.

But how will you judge that a book is great? I had a teacher, forty years ago in Brooklyn College, who said that some books made her hair stand on end, and they were great. Much as I like this criterion, which, I have since discovered, was not original with her, I see some flaws in it. But there are many other diagnostic marks, signs and indices of greatness, that people have listed, and we might talk about them in the question period. Let me add to that multitude one observation of my own, which does not so much pick out greatness as distinguish greatness in works of fiction from greatness in works of reflection:

In a great epic or drama or novel, if any word were different, the tale told would be other than it is; in a great philosophical treatise, every sentence could be paraphrased and the truth told would be the same.

To make myself clearer, let me take the counter-example, that of lesser books: A mediocre novel tells a tale coarse-meshed enough, with characters gross-grained enough, to be equally presentable in language only approximately equivalent. A mediocre piece of philosophy, on the other hand, can't be told to its advantage in other terms: It is all idiosyncratic jargon and its ordinary language paraphrase puts it to shame. That is why trying to say exactly what the book says in another

way is the useful initial exercise in seminar when the work is philosophical, but is love's labor lost when the work is fictional. And that is why it is usually harder to read a novel than it is to read a philosophical text — except perhaps when that text is also a drama. I am referring to the Platonic dialogues, the first of which you will be reading right after Homer. They are the hardest of all, since they are philosophical plays — you will decide whether tragedy or comedy.

Let me end, if not conclude. My question for myself and for you was: "What is a Book?" My answer was: It is a special kind of body made to be inhabited by a curious kind of frozen but fusible soul, a body fit to mediate its own peculiar life. It has a parent, the author, who equips it with all it needs to live on its own, and god-parents, readers, who can revivify its printed life. The books that realize their book nature most perfectly may be called "great", and it is from these that we at St. John's College have selected a number for study. Both because it is a strenuous and wearing business to be constantly in their presence, and for reasons of inclusive humanity, it is good to read many lesser books as well.

Have I answered the question I posed for us? Not remotely. Let us try again in the question period.