Words

The extractive model for reading fails to account for the ways we accomplish *sustained* acts of reading. To sustain a reading, a reader must sense a pattern, what I will call a "plot." In other words, "purpose" is not entirely something that the reader brings to the text—but an orientation that the *writer* helps the reader form. We struggle when writers fail to do this well. The great rhetorical Kenneth Burke called literary form "an arousing and fulfillment of desires" (1968, 124), clearly the sexiest definition of form I know of. And I will extend that to all sustained reading. We don't read extended texts through sheer grit, but we are carried along by some pattern the writer creates. Even if our goal is to learn information, we don't do that well if that information is not connected in some way—and as humans the connection we crave is narrative.

I will use the terms *plot* and *story* in an expansive way to describe how we read texts that we would not normally think of as narrative in any way. My work draws on a central observation that Peter Elbow makes in his award-winning essay, "The Shifting Relationships Between Speech and Writing" (2000). He begins with the obvious point that in sustained reading we process words "in time." We can't take in the whole text at once, spatially, as we might a picture or building. *Structure* only has meaning, human efficacy, if it holds together the temporal moments of our reading. How, then, do we accomplish this?

Elbow wrestles with this question of how we sustain a reading and resolves the problem this way—if there is a text for the sermon of this book, here it is:

> *Thus, the problem of structure in a temporal medium is really the problem of how to* bind time. *Whereas symmetry and pattern bind space (and also bind smaller units of time—in the form of rhythm),*

> *they don't manage very well to hold larger units of time together. What binds larger units of time? Usually it is the experience of anticipation or tension which then builds to some resolution or satisfaction. In well-structured discourse, music, and films (temporal media) we almost invariably see a pattern of alternating dissonance—and—consonance or itch and then scratch. Narrative is probably the most common and natural way to set up a structure of anticipation and resolution in discourse.* (2000, 163)

The implications of Elbow's claim are, in my view, profound—and this book might be viewed as an attempt to work out what it means for the reading and writing of expository and argumentative texts.

He asks us to rethink what we mean by *form* or *structure*. As often presented to students, structure (the outline for example) is static, a set of claims and supports. It is spatial, architectural, and silent about the motives for the reader. As Elbow describes form, it is dynamic, seductive, active, and operating in time; it is a form of energy that the writing generates to sustain reading.

The practical question for teaching, then, is how can we teach students to attune themselves to texts, to align themselves with this generative energy? And as a mirror, the task of the writer is how to invite and guide this kind of mutual involvement? Put another way, how can a writer convince a reader to "stay with me"—and not to skip and sample? These are questions this book will address.

Another implication of Elbow's claim is that we read well-structured nonfiction in the same way we read fiction—and that "understanding" is not the absolute or only goal. Another heretical notion. It is a truism, a circular and almost unquestioned belief, that we read informational writing for . . . , well, information. It is the functional antithesis to literary reading. It is the sober, rational, practical, and duller older brother. We build our store of knowledge with it. The very term *comprehension* has as a root the concept of "holding" or "containing"—and seems to fit an extractive view of reading. Missing from this perspective is the sense of reading as an "experience," an undergoing, a patterned movement through time—and by extension a source of pleasure and satisfaction.

My own reading of excellent nonfiction doesn't work in this extractive way. Take for example *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (Mukherjee 2010), winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, and arguably one

of the greatest pieces of expository writing in the last decade. If anyone were to give me a quiz on the information in this book—ask me to name the major experimenters or even to give a rudimentary account of the cell biology work described in the latter part of the book, I would fail miserably. And who knows how much I will retain a year from now? Yet reading this book was one of my most thrilling and gratifying experiences in years.

What did I get, if not information?

What I got was the *experience* of being with the author as he led me through the cycles of hope and defeat, through the carnage of so many patients in such grueling trials, and the hesitant but steady progress of researchers. I retain the sensation of "cancer" itself becoming the main character of the book—evasive, adaptive, persistent, multiple, an adversary of extraordinary wiliness and devastation. I retain these narrative contours—and the information I retain adheres to them (e.g., the role of Sidney Farber, who believed that childhood leukemia could be treated).

The great value of works like this, like good fiction, is that we put ourselves in the hands of someone else. Wayne Booth put it this way:

> *The author makes his readers. If he makes them badly—that is, if he simply waits, in all purity, for the occasional reader whose perceptions and norms happen to match his own, then his conception must be lofty indeed if we are to forgive him for his bad craftsmanship. But if he makes them well—that is he makes them see what they have never seen before, moves them into a new order of perception and experience altogether—he finds his reward in the peers he has created.* (1961, 397–98)

We sign on for the journey.

If we only read for bits of information, if all nonfiction is viewed as a glorified phone book, we simply plug that information into preexisting schema and we don't change (which is why I think a lot of Internet reading only confirms prejudices). Wikipedia would suffice. For only by moving outside ourselves, by opening ourselves to difference, can we have any hope of being changed, of being educated (literally being "led out"). As William James reminds us, "in the matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives" (1954, 172); we struggle to maintain the status quo, to stay as we are. Our best chance to grow, perhaps our only chance, is to travel.

To be taken into a book like *The Emperor of All Maladies* is to move outside ourselves and to be present as a first-rate mind explains the science and human drama of cancer research. It is to experience another sensibility,

words

It is conventional to view narrative as a mode, a type of writing, often an easy one. When we rely on stories we are accused of being "anecdotal," not intellectually serious. We are told that on the job and in college, we do the hard stuff, the rigorous stuff; we analyze and make logical arguments. We don't tell stories.

But we do. We can't get away from it. Even the arguments we make are often about a version of story, or in the service of story, or in the form of a story. Evidence regularly serves to establish which story, which claim for causality, is most plausible. We critique a story by imagining another story. Informational texts regularly describe processes (evolution, the autoimmune system, photosynthesis, global warming) that take narrative form.

We are caught in time, caught in history. Or rather, history is the form we give to time. We experience our very existence as a progression through time. When my mother lost this capacity she thought she was losing her mind, her *self*. We rely on stories not merely for entertainment, but for explanation, meaning, self-understanding. We instinctively make connections of cause and effect, and always have. To deny the centrality

of narrative is to deny our own nature. We seek the companionship of a narrator who maintains our attention, and perhaps affection. We are not made for objectivity and pure abstraction—for timelessness. We have "literary minds" that respond to plot, character, and details in all kinds of writing.

As the apostle Paul writes in First Corinthians, as humans we "see through a glass darkly," and only through salvation after death, outside of time, can we see truth "face-to-face," in its pure timelessness. Until then, we must live *in* time and proceed by indirection, by narrative.

Plato says something similar in his dialogue in *Phaedrus*, at the point where he attempts to describe the nature of the soul—the very heart of the dialogue. He admits it is "a theme of large and more than mortal discourse" and he chooses to describe it, unforgettably, in a "figure," an extended analogy, a story of the chariot and two horses. If we were godlike, he seems to say, we could dispense with metaphors and analogies and approximations; we could see the truth directly.

But as humans, as time-bound mortals, we must tell stories.