the changing profession

A Little Like Reading: Preference, *Facebook*, and Overwhelmed Interpretations

MICHAEL COBB

Somehow, of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using the word "prefer" upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce?
—Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener" (22–23)

His brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector. He saw
the doorway
the house the night the world and
on the other side of the world somewhere Herakles laughing
drinking getting
into a car and Geryon's
whole body formed one arch of a cry—upcast to that custom, the
human custom
of wrong love.
—Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (75)

Like eyes that looked on Wastes—
Incredulous of Ought
But Blank—and steady Wilderness—
Diversified by Night—

Just Infinites of Nought—
As far as it could see—
So looked the face I looked upon—
So looked itself—on Me—

I offered it no Help—
Because the Cause was Mine—
The Misery a Compact
As hopeless—as divine—

Neither—would be absolved—
Neither would be a Queen
Without the Other—Therefore—
We perish—tho' We reign—
—Emily Dickinson, poem 693

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HERMAN MELVILLE, ANNE CARSON, AND EMILY DICKINSON. THESE AUTHORS' BITS OF LANguage just claimed me as I stared at some books on my office shelf, and I'm not sure exactly what to make of these passages except that I like them. So I'm listing them for you. You might also like them. I like many things, and in no particular order. For instance, here's what I "liked" one day, not long ago, on *Facebook*: a picture of the word *Puppies!* scrawled on a sidewalk; a *New York Times* story about the disorganization of the bicentennial of the War of 1812 (that war has a huge, nearly comical significance in my adopted country of Canada—did you know that Canadians burned down the White House?); an audio clip of Justin Bieber, featuring Busta Rhymes, singing "Little Drummer Boy"; my friend and colleague Jordan Stein's "vegan homo Thanksgiving" photo album; a posting by my "friend" "Emily Dickinson"; numerous updates about and images of the November 2011 pepper spraying of protesting students on the University of California, Davis, campus. I could go on and on, which is probably one of the reasons I, and millions of others, go on and on *Facebook*. *Disorderly* is the right word, but the likes are not quite random. People have generated these items, these virtual objects of interest, for rapid public consumption and, with the ubiquity of the "Like" button, for rapid public response. They (we) put stuff out there in part because we're showing off our preferences, or if not our preferences (even though they will be acknowledged with our liking) then at least things that interest us and (we hope) others. It's hard to know exactly what liking something on *Facebook* means because a like is nearly the same thing as an acknowledgment, something that says, "Yes, I clicked on this item, and it did not displease me." And often people complain in comments that they wish there were variations on the "Like" button ("I want to express my anger with this piece of information—I wish there were a 'Hate' button"). Whatever our motivations or the nature of our interest in what we curate for the world on *Facebook*, these objects for consumption often go under the heading of like; so, like it or not, we're reading for like—we're doing a little like reading.

It's too soon to tell a definitive history of the transformation of contemporary reading practices after the massive impact of social-networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. So these comments are speculative and tentative, not unlike the postings put forward on our very public *Facebook* timelines or *Twitter* feeds. Like reading reminds us of the right now—of the raft of ideas, of amalgams, that are yet to be disciplined by the faith in chronology's explanatory force; we're adrift at sea in the immediate. In fact, the simultaneity of all the possible likes you can have in a *Facebook* session peculiarly blocks acts of interpretation, mainly because we don't take the time to analyze why the preferences appear before us—and they might not even be preferences, just a public display of engagement, or the lazy version of a comment we could have made if there weren't so many things to like in a day. We wander into, consider, and quickly abandon bursts of objects. In fact, they almost take on a fragmentary quality because they've broken off from their context, brushed against one another, and flashed before our faces as we read quickly, and quicker still.

In a real way, I think, the likable *Facebook* object is an object that has been taken out of context, forced into our feeds. And more often than not we attach the likable object to the *Facebook* subject who brought them to our attention ("Jordan Stein is a vegan; he takes

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photographs"). Theodor Adorno, when defending his complicated use of aphorisms in *Minima Moralia*, understands that "subjective reflection . . . has something sentimental and anachronistic about it," but he nevertheless indulges this oddly anti-Hegelian focus on the subject by way of "aphorisms [that] take upon themselves the duty 'to consider the evanescent as essential'" (16). Adorno indulges the doomed quality of subjective reflections, even though they might be too isolated to grasp the totality of a proper dialectical method that understands how systems and not subjects must be vigilantly pursued, and he does so because, as he puts it, we can learn from "individual experience" and because aphorisms never "preten[d] to be complete or definitive: they all are intended to mark out points of attack or to furnish models for a future exertion of thought" (17, 18). These quick, small, often isolated remarks that come from an individual help us understand what kind of object the likable object might be, especially since we attach the object to the friend who posted it on the feed. These likable objects usually feel like aphorisms, or at least we experience them as such in the swarm of likes. They mark out points—they furnish models for "a future exertion of thought."

Susan Sontag, in her excellent essay on Elias Canetti, gives us uncanny insight into the ephemeral quality of a *Facebook* feed she would never know. She was interested in Canetti's notebooks, and I wonder what happens if we think about *Facebook* as a kind of notebook (an apparently ephemeral one—although we must know that nothing on *Facebook* is lost, ever). Here's what Sontag thinks:

> The notebook is the perfect literary form for an eternal student, someone who has no subject or, rather, whose subject is "everything." It allows entries of all lengths and shapes and degrees of impatience and roughness, but its ideal entry is the aphorism. Most of Canetti's entries take up the aphorist's traditional themes: the hypocrisies of society, the vanity of human wishes, the sham of love, the ironies of death, the pleasure and necessity of solitude and the intricacies of one's own thought process. . . . Aphoristic thinking is informal, unsociable, adversarial, proudly selfish. "One needs friends mainly in order to become impudent—that is, more oneself," Canetti writes: there is the authentic tone of the aphorist. The notebook holds that ideally impudent, efficient self that one constructs to deal with the world. By the disjunction of ideas and observations, by the brevity of their expression, by the absence of helpful illustration, the notebook makes of thinking something light. ("Mind" 190–91)

Your *Facebook* profile as notebook. The analogy is not entirely apt, especially if we dwell with the unsociable qualities Sontag assigns to the aphorist. But stay with us; comparisons are never easy or identical (like, as we know, is never the same): the self-construction of the intensely impudent, the very-full-of-oneself, doesn't sound too far from the curated selves we manufacture for our lists of *Facebook* friends, who help us become more self-involved for worldly consumption. It's not clear if we're really being more sociable on social-networking sites or just more impudent. But here is the point I want more at hand: the disjunction of ideas, the brevity of their expressions, and the lack of deep elaboration (or helpful illustration) combine to make thinking light. Make thinking like.

But lightness, likeness, as most people surely must know, cannot merely mean unsubstantial, not cultivated, not worth our time. And while the form of the expression of thinking is made to feel light, that doesn't mean that these objects are too. Levity is not easy work; it's swarming, crowding work. Enter Walter Benjamin, who is best when he's thinking about Baudelaire, and so I want to think of all these likable objects as belonging to something like *Les fleurs du mal*, a notebook of poetry, in which the crowded element is not part of the explicit content of Baudelaire's poetry but a "hidden figure," the

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"phantom crowd of words, the fragments, the beginnings of lines from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests the poetic booty" (165). Certainly, most of the news items, videos, and captions that appear in my news feed are these phantom crowds of fragments, beginnings of lines, encouraging me to click and explore more, if I'm so inclined, if I can stop being the cruising *Facebook* flâneur long enough to commit for a few minutes. What I need to emphasize is that the fragmentary, aphoristic form these broken-up and milling likable objects take is, for Benjamin, a figure for interpreting Baudelaire's verse, which enables Benjamin to read quite creatively beyond the manifest content of what he quite idiosyncratically wants to argue about Baudelaire. Although some might disagree, Benjamin is not reading *Les fleurs du mal* allegorically; or, if he is, he starts with an allegorical figure that's not "really" there—the crowd is not apparent; it's a hidden figure of overwhelming data, experience, language, sensation, fantasy, and people that feels (rather than is) like the habituating shocks that city dwellers must absorb as they learn to be numb to the mass and massing experience of technological modernity. The allegory, I think, is too far removed—the readings of Baudelaire have left his poems, and we're launched into a fantastical interpretive stratosphere that sets us up to read for a form of the multitudes that can dull the senses, that can stop the shock.

But the crowd has not dulled Benjamin. Why, then, is the creation of the dulled masses, of swarming language, of so many choices one could like such a provocative one? Why can the pleasant flâneur lightly regard the overwhelming immediacy, the synchrony, of the present tense that scrolls in front of our lives (and that will not yield precise interpretive insight), giving us the kind of thought that can wondrously strand us in our heads, and for all good measure?

Let's return to those first three likes at the top of this essay and see what happens when I crowd them together. Melville's speaker, in the first fragment, is a lawyer whose scrivener Bartleby ceases to work, to do anything except say, "I prefer not to." The lawyer finds himself "involuntarily using the word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions"; he can't stop repeating it. The lack of precision, the potential for wrongness, occasioned by this inscrutable figure hiding behind a screen in a corner of the office fills him with panic: what psychic damages, what potential deeper harm, has this man with inscrutable preferences wrought, and are Bartleby's qualities contagious? "I must," thinks the lawyer, "get rid of a demented man, who already in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks" (23). In swift order the lawyer is always staring at and cruising Bartleby, attempting to figure him out. Bartleby is a figure for the inability to figure a story out—a trope of turned tongues, refusing sense. It's no wonder that little, as the lawyer tells us at the beginning of the story, is known about Bartleby's history:

> I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report that will appear in the sequel. (3)

And even those original sources fail to reveal much more than Bartleby's intractable desire to never move (in preference, in place). We can even linger with the vague, pronoun-led sentence "It is an irreparable loss to literature" to wonder, what is the loss? Is the loss the near absence of an archive about him, or the telling of his biography, or, more worrisome, the fact that the biography of Bartleby is a story about loss given to literature—the loss of being about to know a like, to know what that like means, and of not having that loss machine turning our tongues into something demented?

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For loss, I think, is crucial in the conceptualization of the unnerving, unexpressive, fragmentary, aphoristic likable object. And nowhere is loss more often expressed than in a scene of heartbreak, which is where we find Anne Carson's Geryon, from her masterpiece, *Autobiography of Red*. Geryon has been dumped by his first love, Herakles, and now he twists inside what Carson calls "a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste" (72). Geryon is learning to write his own history, and he eventually settles on photography as his alternative to life writing, so it's no wonder that the tropes that will torture him are a series of photographic images: "His brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector." What will the effects be? Baudelaire, according to Benjamin, hated photography and its impact on the operations of art:

> Whenever [Baudelaire] felt [photography] as a threat [to more luminous arts], he tried to put it down to its "mistaken developments"; yet he admitted that these were promoted by "the stupidity of the broad masses." "These masses demanded an ideal that would conform to their aspirations and the nature of their temperament. . . . Their prayers were granted by a vengeful god, and Daguerre became his prophet." Nevertheless, Baudelaire tried to take a more conciliatory view. Photography should be free to stake out a claim for ephemeral things, those that have a right "to a place in the archives of our memory," as long as it stops short of the "region of the intangible, imaginative": that of art in which only that is allotted a place "on which man has bestowed the imprint of his soul." (186; ellipsis in orig.)

Lots to quarrel with here, for sure. But Benjamin helps us understand that our photographer, our broken heart, Geryon is brought into the place of the intangible and imaginative after he nervously sees slides, one after another, containing, in quick—but fragmentary—succession images of dark doors, other worlds, and jealousy-inducing moments of Herakles not caught in numb time, not caught between tongue and taste, but laughing, moving, getting into cars. The story of Geryon's body then shifts from a story being told by a bad projector of something that is supposed to be his archive of memory to the movement of his body, which projects his physical form into an arresting figure: his "whole body formed one arch of a cry—upcast to that custom, the human custom / of wrong love." This poetic aphorism about the sliding of images into the figure of a body in longing heartbreak forces us into quick encounters with the smallest content. William de Kooning, in an epigraph that Sontag attaches to her influential early essay "Against Interpretation," articulates, "*Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny—very tiny content*" (3). The flashes of content (Herakles getting into a car, Herakles laughing) are flashes of projected photographic images in Geryon's mind. So tiny is this content, which is immediately subordinated to the larger form of the cry—the arch of the cry—that it leaves us arrested with an image more than a story: a gesture, a little reading, which I like.

Sontag is impatient, however, with acts of reading: "What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*. And conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art" (5). Her snarky piece stridently acknowledges the value only of form, above content, enabling art to be more than "an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (10). She wants us to "recover our senses . . . learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more" (14). I have no patience with her argument. Rarely can we not interpret a thing, encounter any work of art without a whole bunch of knowledge, a whole bunch of desire, and all those mental categories that make art into something useful. Yet she wrote the piece while frustrated with the supremacy of art interpretation over a mode

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of sensual appreciation she found in what she terms "an erotics of art" (14), and these erotics are about immediacy, about our experience of the art object that has not been limited by a use or a category. The form gives Sontag hope that there are many things to say about and do with art rather than interpret it, and by *interpret* (because she still is interpreting) she means interpret too strictly.

Sontag's lament recalls Emily Dickinson's vague poem that begins "Like eyes that looked on Wastes— / Incredulous of Ought / But Blank—and steady Wilderness—." The poem, after all, is about a duel between competing reigns of interpretation ("Neither—would be absolved— / Neither would be a Queen / Without the Other—Therefore— / We perish—tho' We reign—"), and certainly the wastes on which Sontag's "[l]ike eyes" stare is the devaluing of the potentials of art in favor of precise, utilitarian interpretations that leave the art quickly behind. If we continue to think of Sontag's voice as Dickinson's (and in a way ours, when we're on *Facebook*), we could go further and think about the play between being incredulous about "Ought" and the experience of "Nought," a play that doesn't devalue the productivity of "Nought" that has infinities on its side, which might mean endless nothings or that more positive kind of negativity Adorno describes by quoting Hegel: "The life of the mind only attains its truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation. . . . [I]t is this power only when looking the negative in the face, dwelling upon it" (16). Staring into the wilderness of these infinite naughts is what makes the resistant art object a more sensual experience, a recovery of our senses from a kind of desolation, which is immediately imagined in the poem as the encounter Dickinson's speaker has with a face that stares back. This faceoff, this *Facebook* session, if you will, is a miserable "Compact," but one "as hopeless—as divine," a comparison that feels not so hopeless because it is divine. Or it might not be a comparison; the dash breaks apart the line, slowing down the association, so it might be that what follows hopelessness is divinity.

This confusing tarrying with the small, broken-apart negatives, this finding something kind of like inspiration, is what attracts me to this poem and to the reading practices that *Facebook*, like it or not, brings to our faces, as we face it. All the time. You stare into something that can feel like a hopeless oblivion, and then it can stoke a divine thought, or a peculiar combination, which will not yield sovereignty in meaning, or a precise ordering of time, or even a good essay. The crowding of so many bits of language, song, photographs as you scroll the news feed, as you search for distraction, or as you're tugged by hunches and nagging interests can intrigue you as much as (if not more than) the best and precise narrations in that book you wrote about religious hate speech eight years ago. And I can't help wanting to feverishly click "Like" after that last sentence. It means that there's much more light and likable reading to get around to.

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