

## Essay on the Concept of Reading

(*Essai sur la notion de lecture*)

This essay was written in the spring of 1941. While it appears that Weil had plans to expand it at some future date, the present form of the essay is already the result of much previous thinking, as her notebooks show many forays into the concept. The concept of reading also appears in other essays of this period and later. As it is, the essay is in a largely finished state, Weil's mother having typed it, and her typescript has Weil's comments on it. The essay appeared in *Les Études philosophiques*, a journal founded by Gaston Berger, in 1946. The notion of reading that Weil develops here does not seem to be in response to any other thinker; it is original to her.

We shall attempt to define a concept that has not yet found a suitable name, but for which the name “reading” may be the best one. For there is a mystery in reading, a mystery that, if we contemplate it, may well help us, not to explain, but to grab hold of other mysteries in human life.

All of us know that sensation is immediate, a brute fact, and that it seizes us by surprise. Without warning a man is punched in the stomach; everything changes for him before he even knows what happened. I touch something hot and I jerk my hand back before I even know that I burned myself. Something seizes me here—it is the universe, and I recognize it by the way it treats me. No one is surprised by the power

that punches, burns, or sudden noises have to grab hold of us, for we know, or at least believe, that they come from outside us, from matter, and that the mind does not play any part in the sensation, except to submit to it. The thoughts that we ourselves form may bring on certain emotions, but we are not seized by them in the same way.

The mystery is that there are sensations that are pretty much insignificant in themselves, yet, by what they signify, what they mean, they seize us in the same way as the stronger sensations. There are some black marks on a sheet of white paper; they couldn't differ more from a punch in the stomach. Yet, they can have the same effect. We have all experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, the effect of bad news that we have read in a letter or newspaper. Before we have fully taken account of what is going on, we feel ourselves seized and thrown down just as if we had been hit; even much later the sight of the letter remains painful. Sometimes, when time has lessened the pain a bit, one is shuffling through papers and suddenly the letter jumps out, an even more stabbing pain surfaces, just as piercing as any physical pain, seizing us as if it came from outside ourselves and as if the letter itself were on fire. Two women each receive a letter saying that her son is dead. The first one glances at it, faints, and until the day she dies her eyes, her mouth, and her movements will never again be the same. The second one remains unmoved; her face, her posture do not change at all: she doesn't know how to read. It isn't the sensation, it is the meaning that has seized the first woman by striking her mind, immediately, as a brute fact, without her participation in the matter, just the way that sensations strike us. Everything happens as if the pain were in the letter itself, and jumped out from the letter to land on the face reading it. With respect to the actual sensations themselves—the color of the paper or the ink—they do not even come to mind. It is the pain that is given to one's sight.

Thus at each instant of our life we are gripped from the outside, as it were, by meanings that we ourselves read in appearances. That is why we can argue endlessly about the reality of the external world, since what we call the world are the meanings that we read; they are not real. But they seize us as if they were external; that is real. Why should we try to resolve this contradiction when the more important task of thought in this world is to define and contemplate insoluble contradictions, which, as Plato said, draw us upwards?

What is peculiar here is that what we are given is not sensations *and* meanings; what we read is alone what is given. Studies of eyewitness accounts have notably shown this. Proofreading is difficult because while reading we often see letters that the typesetters have actually forgotten to put in; one has to force oneself to read a different kind of meaning here, not that of words or phrases, but of mere letters, while still not forgetting that the first kind of meaning exists. It is impossible not to read; we cannot look at a printed text in a language we understand that is placed in front of us and not read it. At best, one could do this only after a lot of practice.

The “blind man’s stick,” a favorite example of Descartes, furnishes an image analogous to reading. Everybody can convince himself that when handling a pen his touch goes right through the pen to the nib. If the pen skips because of some problem with the paper, the *pen’s* skipping is what is immediately felt; we don’t even think about the sensations in our fingers or hand through which we read. However, the pen’s skipping is really only something we read. The sky, the sea, the sun, the stars, human beings, everything that surrounds us is in the same way something that we read. What we call a correction of a sensory illusion is actually a modified reading. If at night, on a lonely road, I think I see a man waiting in ambush instead of what is actually a tree, it is a human and menacing presence that forces itself on me, and, as in the case of the letter, it makes me quiver even before I know what it is. I get closer and suddenly everything changes, and as I read a tree, and not a man, I no longer quiver. There is not an appearance *and* then an interpretation; a human presence has penetrated to my soul through my eyes, and now, just as suddenly, the presence of a tree. If I hate someone, he is not on one side and my hatred on the other; when he comes near me it is odiousness itself that approaches; the perversity of his soul is more evident to me than the color of his hair. Moreover, if he is blond, he is a hateful blond, if he is a brunette, he is a hateful brown. Esther in drawing near to Ahasuerus did not draw near to a man who she knew could put her to death; she drew near to majesty itself, to terror itself that reaches her soul through her eyes; that is why the very effort of walking towards him makes her stumble. She herself says so; what she looks at with fear is not the face of Ahasuerus, it is the majesty that is etched there, and she reads that. We speak generally in such cases of the effects of the

imagination, but it may well be better to use the word “reading.” This word implies that it is a question of effects produced by appearances. However, they are appearances that do not actually appear, or hardly ever; what does appear is something else that is related to appearances as a phrase is related to letters. We see it as an appearance, suddenly, as a brute fact, from outside, and, according to the evidence, pretty much irrefutably.

If I see a book bound in black, except to philosophize, I do not doubt that black is there. If I look at the top of a newspaper and see “June 14,” I do not doubt that it was printed on June 14. If a being that I hate, or that I fear, or that I despise, or that I love approaches, I above all do not doubt that I have in front of me the odious, the dangerous, the despicable, the lovable. If someone, reading the same newspaper and looking at the same place in it, seriously told me, after several tries, that he did not read “June 14” but “June 15,” that would bother me. I wouldn’t know what to say. If someone does not hate, fear, despise, or love the way I do, that also bothers me. How? He sees these beings—or, if they are distant, he sees the indirect manifestations of their existence—and he does not read the odious, the dangerous, the despicable, the lovable? That is not possible. This is a case of bad faith; he’s lying; he’s crazy. It is not quite right to say that we believe ourselves in danger because we are afraid; on the contrary, we are afraid because of the presence of danger since it is danger that gives rise to fear. However, danger *is* something that I read. Sounds and sights are by themselves devoid of danger, they are no more dangerous than the paper and the ink in a threatening letter. But in the case of a threatening letter the danger that I read takes me beyond those things, and makes fear come to me. If I hear an explosion, fear lives in the noise and comes to take my soul by hearing; I no more can refuse to fear than I can refuse to hear. If I know what the sound is, the same thing happens when I hear the “ack-ack” of a machine gun; it doesn’t if I don’t know. It is not, however, a question of something that is analogous to a conditioned reflex; it is a question of something analogous to *reading*, where sometimes a combination of novel signs that I have never seen seizes my soul right where the wounding meaning penetrates, along with the black and the white, and just as irresistibly.

Thus meanings, which if looked at abstractly would seem to be mere thoughts, arise from every corner around me, taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English phrase, “my soul is no longer my own.” I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act according to what I read; how could I act any other way? If I read in a noise honor to be won, I run towards the noise; if I read danger and nothing else, I run far from the noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting the way I do, even if I regret it, is imposed on me in a clear and immediate way, as the noise, with the noise. I read in the noise. In the same way, if during civil unrest or war unarmed men are sometimes killed, it is because there is something vile about these beings that penetrates through the eyes to the soul of armed men along with the sight of their clothes, hair, faces, something that asks to be annihilated. In a glance, these armed men read along with their hair color and flesh the evidence that says it is necessary to kill them. If in the normal course of life there are actually few crimes, it is because we read in the colors that penetrate our eyes that when a human being is standing in front of us that there is something to which we owe a certain measure of respect. It is the same thing as with the case of the man who, on a lonely road, first sees a man looking out for passersby, and then a tree. It is in the first case above all an unreserved response to a human presence, and the idea that there could be a *question* of a man is an abstract one that is weak and that comes from within him, not from the outside, and that has no bite. Then suddenly is triggered within him, without transition, the fact that he is alone, surrounded only by plants and things. The idea that a man could have been there where he now sees a tree has become in its turn a weak idea. In the same way, during peacetime, the idea of causing the death of a human being comes from the inside, it isn’t read in the appearances—one reads, on the contrary, in the appearances the prohibition of killing. But in a civil war, put somebody in contact with a certain category of human beings and the idea of *sparing* a life is weak, coming from the inside. There is no transition possible in going from one state to the other; the passage happens as by the pulling of a trigger. Each reading, when it is current, appears as the only real, only possible way to look at things; the other one seems purely imaginary. These are, of course, extreme examples, but

all of our life is made from the same cloth; meanings impose themselves on us successively, and each of them, when it appears and enters into us through the senses, reduces all opposing ideas to the status of phantoms.

I possess a certain power over the universe that allows me to change appearances, but it is an indirect one that requires work; it isn't there by simply wishing. I put a sheet of white paper over a black book and I no longer see black. This power is limited by the limits of my physical strength. I also possibly possess a certain power to change the meanings that I read in appearances and that are imposed on me. However, this power is also limited, indirect, and it, too, requires work. Labor in the normal sense of the word is an example of this work because every tool is a blind man's stick, an instrument for reading, and every apprenticeship is an apprenticeship in reading. When the apprenticeship ends, meanings come to me from the nib of my pen or from a phrase embedded in printed characters. For the sailor, for the experienced captain, his boat has become in a sense an extension of his own body; it is an instrument by which to read the tempest, and he reads it very differently than a passenger does. Where the passenger reads chaos and unlimited danger, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, resources for escaping, and an obligation to be courageous and honorable.

Action on oneself and action on others consist in transforming meanings. A man, a head of state, declares war, and new meanings rise up all round forty million people. The general's art is to lead enemy soldiers into reading flight in appearances and in such a way that the idea of holding fast loses all substance, all effectiveness. He can do it, for example, by stratagems, by surprises, by using new weapons. War, politics, eloquence, art, teaching, all action on others essentially consists in changing what they read.

Whether it is a question of action on oneself or another, there are two issues to deal with, that of technique and that of value. Texts, whose appearances are characters, take hold of my soul, then abandon it and are replaced by others. Is one worth more than the other? Is one truer than the other? Where does one find a norm? Thinking a text to be true even though I am not reading it, that I have never read it, assumes that there is a reader of this truthful text, which is to say, it assumes God. But as soon as we do that, there is a contradiction, for the concept of reading

does not fit our concept of God. Even if it did, it still would not let us order our readings of texts according to a scale of values.

Still, posed this way, the problem would perhaps be worth meditating on. For posed in this way it presents in one package all the possible problems of value, to the degree that they are concrete. A man who is tempted to keep a deposit for himself will not keep from doing it simply because he has read *The Critique of Practical Reason*; he will refrain from it, because it will seem to him, despite himself, that something in the deposit itself cries out to be given back. Everybody has experienced something like this where it seems that one would actually like to act badly, but cannot do it. At other times, one would like to act well, but one cannot do it. Figuring out whether one who reads returning a deposit this way reads better than someone who reads in the appearances all the desires that he might be able to satisfy if he kept the money is to seek for a criterion that would allow one to decide the matter, to seek out a technique that would permit one to pass from one reading to another. That is a problem that is more concrete than trying to decide whether it is better to keep it or give it back. Furthermore, by posing the problem of value this way around the concept of reading puts it in relation to truth and beauty as well as to the good, and it is not possible to separate them. Perhaps doing this, the connection of these three things, which is a mystery, would be made a bit clearer. We do not know how to think these things as one, and yet they cannot be thought separately.

