

# DISINTERESTEDNESS

The essay that means to defend disinterestedness by claiming it exists will be both very short and very weak; even the essay on perfect goodness would be longer. Further, triumphant announcement by a generation of readers that impartiality, the absence of what my dictionary calls "selfish bias", cannot inform the act of reading distracts from a more pragmatic debate concerning the implications of an ideal, which is what disinterestedness—reading as though one had no personality—must be.

The function of an ideal is to compel, in our behavior, its approximation. Thus the fantasy of perfect goodness and craving toward it inspire individual acts of goodness (also, possibly, rebellious acts of violence, the furious objection to the impossible standard). I believe that the attempt to read disinterestedly encourages that reading which best apprehends the page and most passionately registered whatever is held there. Self interest is speaking: through this means, more accrues to the reader. Even the historical eye of criticism is served, since no account *in medias* can more tellingly dramatize the ambiance of a period than the attempt to omit the self from description. Inevitably, in any reading, some aspect of the work at hand will

be emphasized or avoided; when these readings occur systematically, in the scrutiny of literature by various minds, the preoccupations and beliefs of an epoch declare themselves. Our present avidity to publish our biases, to introduce them into analysis, seems like skittishness—no one is going to do to us what we do to our predecessors. We are obsessed with exposure, and prefer to take the initiative, to expose ourselves.

All this describes receptivity, which begins with the self's effacement. This we fear in ourselves because we link passivity to non-existence and fear in others, perceiving a danger to ourselves in receptivity's acquisitive capaciousness. But the analogy between human relations and the relation of reader to page is false: it ignores the fundamental distinction between willed self-effacement, which is temporary, and helpless self-effacement, which is annihilation.

Granted the self without "selfish bias" doesn't exist, suspending, a little longer, discussion of advantage, the practical question remains: how does an actual self approach a work of literature imitating the paradigm? Insofar as possible, by enacting the pretense: at issue is not what the mind is but how it conducts itself. So, for the moment, it suspends opinion and response, all the means by which it has so long struggled to define itself, attempting, instead, neutrality, attentiveness; for the moment, it plays dead; only a very deep confidence in literature's power allows this, and only the training in pretense allows the birth of such confidence. The hope of animation through the work of art infuses this manner of reading with a constant ongoing anticipatory energy; as the work is absorbed, the idling mind responds with checked gratitude. Checked lest gratitude give too premature a report of itself and, in so doing, forfeit some part of the inexhausted work.

What is omitted from this approach is the notion of dialogue: the forceful self engaging the shifting work. For the calculated patience of disinterest, such cooperative reading substitutes dispute, debate, challenge alternating with enthusiastic accord. The superficial fluidity and dynamism of this method mask its deeper rigidity and

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limitedness. Also its cumulative dreariness: the imposition of one's  
 own personality on a work, for all the momentary giddiness of the in-  
 teractive ideal, refuses to withhold personality long enough for the  
 work to exert its character. This method weds itself to the repeating  
 limitations of the single self, which projects onto literature a dispirit-  
 ing sameness, an absence of any real variety. Whether the self chooses  
 to play the adversary or the prince with his ready kiss, the self  
 chooses the terms of interaction, to make of its account of reading yet  
 another diary of relationship. By refusing, even for the moment, to  
 subordinate itself, the self triumphs. The cost and prize are the same:  
 it isn't changed. This method arises, possibly, to protest the ruse of  
 disinterest, in the conviction there must be a truer way to read, a way  
 less tainted by fraud. As indeed there may be.

But what is sacrificed with the ruse of disinterest is the opportu-  
 nity to experience, briefly, no division between self and work, to be-  
 come, briefly, nothing that is not that work (as Stevens might have  
 had it). That the moment abandons us does not diminish its clarity  
 and force; that it begins with pretense or disguise does not undermine  
 the reality of its gift: perception, even flawed perception, of a universe  
 and, sometimes, the pleasure of accurate homage.