Feelings About Books

Louis Foley
Babson College
Once upon a midnight dreary,
While I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious
Volume of forgotten lore . . .

Thus begins Poe's most famous poem, *The Raven*, which from its first
publication in 1845 had an immediate and wide success such as no
American poem had ever achieved. While the entire poem carries an
air of inevitability—of the perfect wording that has to be as it is—for my part I find none of it so unforgettable as those opening lines.
Perhaps that may be simply because it is the beginning, but I hardly
think so. Rather, for me it is a demonstration of how a rhythmical
combination of harmonious words can charm us into belief in facti-
tious imagery and forgetfulness of what the words actually mean.

*Pondering*—literally weighing—is not something that one does over
books, especially if weak and weary. It requires being wide awake and
clear-sighted. One ponders questions, weighing the pro and the con.
It implies meditation, most likely without any books in hand. Weak
and weary at midnight, one might peruse or pore over one quaint and
curious volume, but certainly not many. Incidentally, in *The Philoso-
phy of Composition*, Poe referred to the student as “occupied half in
poring over a volume, half in dreaming of a beloved mistress de-
ceased.” And can we imagine what kind of books these were? Poe did
not know any more than we do. They are mere stage-properties used
to invoke a certain atmosphere. In keeping with the romantic taste
which still hung on in Poe's time, they suggest mysterious esoteric
knowledge of something like black magic, quaint and curious “lore”
such as ritualistic formulae for the summoning of spirits or the casting
of spells. The idea of cabalistic records of medieval occultism, in which
the erudite scholar enjoys dabbling, prepares an eerie ambience for
some kind of seemingly supernatural manifestation. One senses that
something out of the ordinary is imminent. A background of vaguely
weird, uncanny atmosphere is created as preparation for what is to
follow.

Insofar as such writings ever existed, they were certainly not
“books” in our sense but manuscripts probably undecipherable for
any but the initiated. There is food for thought, however, in what is
—unconsciously no doubt—implied in the mere mention of books.
Before the invention of printing, books were slowly and painfully produced. A monk who, between his other duties, spent a couple of hours a day in copying might pass years in making one book; in fact it might have to be finished by someone else after he had passed on. Naturally only material taken to be of permanent value was deemed worth the trouble. Understandably, the attitude of reverence for books as peculiarly precious things hung on long after printing had made them relatively easy to acquire. Anything in the form of a book was naturally presumed to contain timeless wisdom. It is hardly necessary to mention the great religions of the world which have given supreme importance to the books which represent them—the Torah, the Bible, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, Mrs. Eddy's Science and Health. The anti-religion of Communism is based on Karl Marx's Kapital. The book comes to be regarded as a sacred object in itself, revered superstitiously by people who seldom or never read it and have little real understanding of its contents. It is used symbolically to seal the most solemn oaths. For the average person nowadays, however, swearing on and by sacred Scriptures must not involve quite the same feeling of solemnity that it surely had for our ancestors in the past.

"I read somewhere in a book . . ." As things used to be, that seemed to settle the matter. In our more skeptical age, we want to know who wrote the book, how he came to write it, and what authority he had to speak. We rather suspect there may be other books which express quite different ideas, possibly nearer the truth.

Through the force of circumstances in which I grew up, I believe I can thoroughly sympathize with the attitude of people in general toward books throughout the nineteenth century, during which I think it did not greatly change. One element in my conditioning, though of minor importance, was the fact that both sides of my family were represented in the legal profession and my father was a judge for many years. In the idiom of that time, to prepare for being a lawyer one "read" law. Certainly that experience tended to give a person a respect for books. Any influence from that quarter, however, could only have been very indirect. It was not the volumes in my father's law library, which he kept in his offices, that made the difference. What counted was the fact that he had much the largest private library in the town of 30,000 people in which we lived.

Most of those books were beautifully bound. Behind glass on the shelves of extensive built-in bookcases reaching to the high ceiling, besides supplementary movable ones of large-wardrobe size, they virtually surrounded three-fourths of the spacious room. Visitors were
always impressed by the collection, which they usually regarded with some degree of awe. Those books were not there, however, for any purpose of impressing the beholder. Nothing could have been farther from my father’s nature than any slightest taste for vulgar display. He had read them, and when he could find time he enjoyed rereading them. He was interested in knowledge, which he valued for its own sake, just the pure satisfaction of knowing and understanding things. I have often wondered how in the course of a busy life of many responsibilities he had ever managed to do the vast amount of reading he had evidently done. And he seemed to remember everything he had ever read. He never made a show of it; it just came out quietly in response to casual remarks in ordinary conversation. I think he had a sentimental love of those books for what they had given him, a feeling of gratitude for the rich vie intérieure he must have had, which they had made possible.

The collection covered a wide range of subjects but included very little fiction. There were, however, the complete works of a few novelists, notably Balzac, whom he greatly admired and whose stories he seemed to know by heart. My own taste for what I think of as “serious” books may be due in some measure to the sort of thing I found most interesting in that library as a boy. Being fond of animals, I was drawn to an illustrated work on natural history, in a number of volumes, “translated from the French of Louis Figuier.” Since I always took for granted that reading anything meant reading every single bit of it, I conscientiously read, each time they came up, the scientific Latin names of the various creatures as they were regularly given in parentheses. That was before I ever studied Latin, but to this day, after thorough training in preparatory and college Latin (in which I achieved my highest marks) such names as felis leo, felis tigris, felis pardus, or hippopotamus amphibius, and the like seem more familiar to me than most of the Latin vocabulary I absorbed later in school.

A considerable amount of shelf-space was occupied by the volumes of magazines which my father had bound every six months (a year’s issues would have made much too thick a volume). He had taken The Century from its first appearance in November, 1881, and Scribner’s from its beginning in 1887. There were also Munsey’s and others. The Century above all I shall always remember for much of the most delightful reading I have ever known. A number of literary creations which were destined to become prominent first appeared serially in that magazine, such as, for example, The Bostonians by Henry James,
The Rise of Silas Lapham by William Dean Howells, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Among short stories to be included in reading lists for many years, I remember Ruth McEnery Stuart's The Gentleman of the Plush Rocker, and stories by Seumas MacManus. There were George Ade's Modern Fables and the verses of James Whitcomb Riley. There were fascinating articles on all manner of subjects; a series by Robert Hichens on The Spell of Egypt, beautifully illustrated, was unforgettably impressive. As a boy, with my love of animals, I was quite carried away by Ernest Seton Thompson's Biography of a Grizzly. As the leading pictorial magazine of its day, The Century published not only many appropriate photographs and drawings but particularly noteworthy frontispieces, among which I remember a series of Timothy Cole's wood engravings of French and Spanish masters.

Now a point I wish to make here is that these bound volumes of magazines were real books, and they remain so. Almost any one of them will be found to contain fascinating reading today for any literate, open-minded person who will take the trouble to leaf through it unhurriedly. It is not being merely nostalgic to recognize with fair objectivity that a great deal of the material in those magazines had a lasting quality that makes it good reading for all time. Anything to be bound and cherished as a book should have reasonable permanence. Nowadays such are undoubtedly being produced, but they seem overshadowed by vast numbers of alleged books of no more than momentary interest, little more fitted to endure than the newspaper which we skim through hastily today and forget tomorrow.

It was part of my early training to be taught to handle books respectfully, almost reverently. To begin with, one's hands must be scrupulously clean. The book was to be opened carefully, so as to run no risk of breaking the binding. To turn a page with a moistened thumb, as one might do with a telephone directory or a mail-order catalogue, would be desecration. To dare make pencil marks on a page, annotations of any sort, was inconceivable.

So far as those precious old books are concerned, the few of them I still possess, or say a book about art with fine reproductions of celebrated paintings, I still have much the same feeling. Otherwise, however, with modern books (if they belong to me!) I feel no compunction whatever in marking them up in any way, to emphasize particular passages or add comment upon them. The content is all that counts; the physical vehicle is merely the means of conveying it. Anyhow, if I lost or wore out a copy, another could be had; there would be no sentimental feeling about the original.
Nearly everything in my father's library I gave away many years ago, as I was to do later with other libraries which I had built up myself. About all that remains of that imposing collection amid which I grew up is several carefully selected volumes of *The Century* and an edition of *The Raven* designed no doubt as a gift book, a form of remembrance which was popular in the days of my parents. Originally copyrighted by E. P. Dutton and Company in 1883, this edition was published in 1893. Every page, as well as the front and back cover, is embellished with an appropriate drawing which inimitably evokes the proper atmosphere. These illustrations were made by W. L. Taylor, "drawn and engraved under the supervision of George T. Andrew." I have never seen a book which seemed to me more fittingly illustrated. Naturally I treasure the book not only for its intrinsic attractiveness but as a sentimental keepsake of a bygone age. Yet it shows the ambivalent attitude toward books into which I have grown. For I have not hesitated to make pencil marks on pages here and there in that quaint and curious little volume.