

# THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group

## On the Death of Reading

by Eric Verhine

Martin Luther's account of his conversion is one of the most significant and oddly nagging passages that I have ever read. More than any other text or experience, Luther's conversion-account has forged my philosophy of the nature of reading. Only recently have I discerned his influence and begun to question the model of the experience of reading that I have taken from him. These reflections on Luther's model of reading are not my conclusions, not at all; they are my first footfalls into the labyrinth of my assumptions about one of the most consequential activities I so often perform – reading.

Before he was one of the fomenters of the Reformation, Martin Luther was a monk in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, where he suffered an abstentious and dreadful existence. His abstention and dread did not come from the monkish conditions in which he lived, however; they came from within Martin Luther himself and from his furious encounter with the text of the New Testament. Luther tells us that though he “lived as a monk without reproach,” he “felt that

[he] was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience.” What so disturbed Luther's conscience was a single term in chapter one of Paul's letter to the Romans:

“the righteousness of God...’ that had stood in my way... For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as the formal or active righteousness... with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.”

In the light, or the darkness, of his interpretation of this term and verse (*Romans* 1.17), Luther could not understand how, if God were righteous and desirous to punish sinners, he could ever have any hope of salvation. He did not think that his efforts in the monastery would, as he says, placate so righteous a God. It was not that Luther had done anything exceptionally evil; indeed, he was an irreproachable monk. It was that he perceived the exceptionally infinite holiness of God, a holiness that tolerates not the least taint and that judges human righteousness as worthless rags. He thus “raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.”

“Nevertheless,” he says, “I beat importunately upon Paul

in that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.” When Luther says that he “beat importunately” on Paul in that place, he does not mean that summoned Paul from the dead and kicked his ass in the monastery. Luther means that he read; he read fiercely, passionately, desperately. He read and reread *Romans* 1.17 until at last, he says, “by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words... [and] there began to understand.” What Luther began to understand was that the “righteousness of God” in 1.17 is not the active righteousness with which God punishes sinners, but “the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies” sinners. Luther came to understand that according to Paul, God does not actively punish sinners because of his righteousness; rather, God imputes righteousness to passive sinners on the basis of their faith in God.

Upon his new understanding of Paul, says Luther, “I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.... Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.” Luther's conversion experience gave him both the theology and the inspiration for his role in the Reform

movement, and his was a central role.

Not being a Christian, I am not concerned with Luther's theology, but with his radical experience of a text. Do such experiences of texts still occur? I'm not sure they do, yet something within me tells me that perhaps they do, and certainly they should. What is most peculiar about Luther's experience is not its intensity, though such fierce reading is rare, but the assumption underlying Luther's experience: that his text – that page of white space, with marks, letters, words, and sentences – can tell him something so significant about and relevant to himself that it alters his entire existence and the course of his behavior. Luther's experience with the text of *Romans* 1.17 is life-altering not because it is pleasurable, nor because it is useful, nor even because it is profound, but because he learns something profound about himself, or he learns something profoundly relevant to his own existential predicament.

Do such experiences as Luther's still occur? Do we still read as he did? More specifically, do we still make Luther's assumption that a text, any text, can tell us something profoundly significant about and relevant to our own predicaments? Has the experience of reading texts changed with the advance of relativism and perspectivism? Do not readers nowadays conceive of the text as nothing more than a contextualized and hence relativistic perspective on

human life and the cosmos, and if so, can such a conception of the text allow for a reader to find her life, her life-altering epiphany, from words on a page? Is Luther's view of the text and reading antiquated, passe, or overly German?

Another German and an admirer of Luther, Friedrich Nietzsche, best explains why Luther's experience of reading may be dead and buried: because God is dead and buried. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche puts his message that God is dead into the mouth of a madman. After the madman explains that humans – we – killed God, he asks these relevant, and terrible, questions: "What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?" To Nietzsche, the death of God means, in part, that we have become so autonomous in our thought and life that God is no longer a real presence. We have ignored God for some time now, so long that we cannot revive our former experience of God's presence. The madman's questions about the death of God are rhetorically-veiled, spatial metaphors that relate the conscious experience of life in a universe without God. So the question "Is there any up or down left?" asks about the possibility of any standards of

thought or value in such a universe.

Relevant to this discussion of reading are the madman's questions "Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns?" A sun is a source of light and life. A fathomless, urgent source of light and life. Is the loss, if indeed it is lost, of Luther's experience of reading the loss of a sun? Is the death of God the reason why we treat texts so unemotionally, so indifferently, so insolently today? Do we believe that any text has anything really significant and relevant to say to each of us as individuals, and to our individual predicaments?

Or is Nietzsche our Apostle Paul? Must we beat upon him for some hope of light and life?

*Please join the PDG for our discussion of the death of reading, and bring your own thoughts, questions, and experiences. We will meet in the Honor's Lounge in Gamble Hall on April 15 at 7:00.*

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Eric Verhine or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for *The Philosopher's Stone*, please contact either of us.

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