TIPS ON READING, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates starting out in their first year of the English course at Caius, though they may have a use for students at a later stage, as a reminder. It may seem that intensive reading as part of a concentrated course of literary study is different in kind from reading for pleasure or recreation, but such semblance of difference should not be assumed to waymark a permanent divide; only longer experience will shed stronger light on this question. These notes also need to be read in conjunction with Tips on Practical Criticism, since transferable skills in alert reading are the specific focus of Practical Criticism exercises.

2. Reading is a complex and many-layered activity, but it also involves a repertoire of acquirable skills, and what follows is directed mostly to this latter aspect. You will do a great deal of reading over the duration of your course, more intensively and under greater pressure that before. Some of your reading will concern deep questions of how to read, of reading historically, of how texts carry and provoke meaning, of translation across languages, of interpretation and assimilation and of reading towards insight and critical judgement and the formation of personal taste. All these aspects will present their invitations and challenges in due course. But practical skills come first.

3. There are many different kinds of reading activity, based on different needs and contexts. We read a map, then read the signpost, then we read the sky for signs of weather, the face of our companion for signs of fatigue or boredom. We read a newspaper, a notice about revised postal rates, Saint Luke's Gospel. An important initial question is the target level of attention we set for a specific reading task, the length and quality of time we allocate and the plan we make in order optimally to achieve the hoped-for result. These notes assume 'serious' reading, that is, book-reading for enhanced literary pleasure and understanding, for study and retention in memory, for internal self-debate and critical appraisal. Remember that whatever the curriculum and the syllabus may demand, it is you who decide what to read, and how strenuously. Challenge yourself, and maintain a good discipline, which essentially means, good work habits. Read a lot.

4. Over the stages of a term or a vacation you will need to plan and prioritise your reading tasks, and it is necessary to be specific and realistic above all. Make a close estimate of what needs to be done, and in what sequence, and how much time will be needed. If you skimp a challenging exercise of deep reading, this may be worse than no reading at all, because the text will never develop a complex resonance in your thoughts and memory, having not been given enough chance to do so. You will always be in a rush from one project to another; but learn to clear a concentrated oasis of good quality attention for any reading work which you hope may have important results. Remember also that vacations present precious spreads of time clear of the weekly rush, so that extended works can be tackled on the right kind of grand scale, and also major reading for the next term in prospect can ease the pressure up ahead. The two long vacations are especially

crucial, and you should not plan to spend every part of them on bookless jaunts.

5. A first practical requirement is a good text. All reading needs to be based on a well edited text which is up to date and which does not cut corners by being simplified for amateur readers. As a professional student of literature you ought by now to understand why a popular or old-fashioned edition is not good enough for you; it may shorten or tamper with the text, simplify spelling and punctuation, not bother with much respect for the historical specificity of the language or the problems of revision, and alteration, be scarcely if at all supplied with essential annotation and background context. Not every important work of literature that you read has to be boiled down into a student paperback, but be aware that books do not present themselves free of problems about what they purport to contain. The English Faculty issues many lists of recommended reading, which are kept in the Faculty Library, but these too may need interpretation; if in doubt, seek advice from your current supervisor before you embark.

6. Once you decide on the text to use, consider whether you need to possess your own copy; if yes, then what's in print, and at what price, may also affect your choice. If you are about to open acquaintance with a major text which you will return to over and over again, adding layers of understanding and insight as you go, it makes sense to own a copy that you can annotate and mark up in ways that will enable you subsequently to find your way about the internal structure, locate specific passages, mark significant moments in the sequence of the action or potentially important repetitions, and so on. You will of course under no circumstances ever make marks in library copies; and your own copy will offer the added advantage that it will be always to hand for consultation, and can be ported to a place where you may transcribe into it selected information from a major dictionary, a glossary or text companion, then returning your own enriched copy to its place on your shelves.

7. Next you will need a session plan. Novels and plays are too extended to consume at a single sitting. Works prescribed for detailed special study will need to be perused and annotated line by line. Collections of poems that are intricate and demanding cannot be gobbled up all at once. Historical and critical studies will tax your ability to keep awake and active with your own judgements, rather than sliding into acceptance of an apparent authority. You will need to determine the optimum length of a good reading session, depending on the reading task and on your powers of attention and stamina. Don't habitually read too fast, or read beyond your effective attention-span, or your eyes will glaze over and you will assimilate less and less. When you plan out the sequence of reading sessions, try to keep them reasonably close together, so that memory doesn't fade under pressure of intervening activity; and remember that the final session needs to include space for retrospective review and pondering and keeping a good record of your results (perhaps, indeed, composing a supervision essay). Read where you are comfortable, not slumped or hunched up, and where you will not be interrupted or distracted. Be sure there is good ventilation or you will soon get drowsy, and drowsing over a book can become addictive if you don't guard against it. Make a time-table, and try to keep to it: success depends on forming good habits right from

the start.

8. Some reading projects you will devise for yourself, outside the scheme of specified study. You may decide to read through the whole of Dante's *Commedia*, or the major novels of Dostoevsky, and you may decide to read at full sweep, that is, without pause for notes or commentary or any interruption whatever. You may form a small reading group and read aloud to each other certain plays, or perhaps major slices of *The Canterbury Tales*. If you are an actor you may be preparing a text for the task of learning a part for performance. You may decide on a strategic first reading of a major extended work at top speed, prior to returning closely to the task of making closer sense at a later stage. In all such cases, even if you decide to take no notes and look up no points, plan the sessions, set the level of attention deliberately and keep it under control.

9. Focussing the mind on a task is called attention. It is a complex act, and in large measure it is a skill that can be practised and learned. Different kinds and powers of attention suit different tasks; also, concurrent but separate continuities of attention will need to be kept running in separate channels, so that one train of reading and thought over a run of sessions will not blur across into another. With practice you will learn to adjust and keep control over attention, and maintain several distinct layers and channels at once. Here are a few initial suggestions. As you begin to read, size up the scale and genre of the work so that you are keyed into its tacit expectations, the kind of reader-involvement it looks for. You will often need to reconstruct this aspect historically, for a non-contemporary work. Pay attention to the progressive disclosure of the work's structure and intentions. Observe the features of style that build up characteristic textures of language usage, idiom and figure and textual borrowing, and observe the ways in which these features may also have their own internal development. Cultivate a close memory for specific turns of phrase, images, cadences and prosodic manoeuvres. But sometimes a prevailing idea may be implied only by multiple profiles and ambiguities, to the extent that no precisely clear view is ever offered; here we may have to hold on to shifting textures and nuance rather than simplifying reductively.

10. Attention to large structure and to detail simultaneously, and to means by which the one is built up progressively by interweaving of the other, requires practised uses of reading memory. As we read we store our perception of notable features for recall and progressive integration into ongoing synthesis. Taking the measure of a text feature does require focussed memory, and you will need to practise not forgetting detail even over an extended reading task. Alertness and vigilance can be sharpened by testing yourself after part of a session: how much do you exactly recollect, what words were used and where, what patterns and tacit intimations made their mark in your mind. The mental structure of the reading process is still not well understood; some alternative models are reviewed in Keith Rayner and Alexander Pollatsek, *The Psychology of Reading* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., *c.*1989), Chap. 13 (Caius Lib.: 418.4019 R); and see also Elizabeth Styles, *The Psychology of Attention* (Hove, 1997) (Caius Lib.: 153.733 S), esp. sections on 'attentional control as a skill' and 'learning to do two things at once' (both rather superficially technical). Another resource would be Alan Baddeley,

Working Memory (Oxford, 1986) (Caius Lib.: 153.12 B), Part IV Chap. 8: 'Fluent Reading'.

11. Some of these points may make acts of aroused attention in reading seem like no more than ordered diagnosis of text construction and technique. But literature which stimulates and challenges the imagination also works by provoking in the reader unexpected response patterns, setting off the mind in new directions, richly unpredicted, at best deeply puzzling in ways that can stir up ideas and feelings beyond the reach (at least initially) of full comprehension or control. Some of these responses may turn out to be mirages, floating associations rather than strong insights. But learn to allow yourself a loose rein as your powers of imaginative response can catch up energy from a text and bring unfamiliar rewards of excitement and vividness and culmination. Tune in to features of scale and rhythmic progression, assimilate these into your perceptions of how language makes, turns and sometimes breaks a world. The entrance into elaborated textual complexity can for relative beginners sometimes strike a note of intimidation; but learn to take enrichment from your response to sustained ambiguity of presentation, a sense of layers and part-concealments inside the text; even fierce mockery and satire can activate moments of amazement at what is apparently most condemned. First reading of a grand work should ideally hold itself as open as possible within the demands of study, open to sweep and pitch and sudden recognition, swerves of structure and brilliant detail; close descriptive apprehension can come later, to confirm or qualify these initial encounters.

12. Thus, do not routinely start to nit-pick and take righteous notes from line one, day one, or you will become a study-nerd. Remember from one heroic reading-task to another how ideas and questions and complex human feelings half-explicit within text writing and text development are not mere schemes of decoration or thematic manoeuvre; the relation to experience in the best (strongest) works will challenge the reader to enter the field of his or her own experience, and to do strenuous work with parallels of human imagination, direct and oblique. Reading in this sense can challenge increasingly deep powers of response and control and understanding, and may not be fully compatible with lucid insight at all stages of the process. Literary reading is not a mere spectator sport, and literary study is enhanced reading, not a professionalised alternative to it; do not be dazzled too readily, but don't resist all dazzlement out of morbid self-protection. This may, *en passant*, sound like an idealised reading-scheme for *Paradise Lost*, right through from beginning to end: it is.

13. Local alertness can itself also be enhanced by practice in putting it to use. In reading a play, for instance, don't lose sight of the stage action, who is on stage even if not speaking, for whose benefit is a speech made, what groupings and actions are implied, how much more or less do we know (as the audience) than the persons within the action. Not-speaking can be potent speech. Give thought also to absent persons: Mrs Lear, Mrs Volpone, for instance, even if not to Lady Macbeth's children. You should effectively be staging the play in your mind as you read along with it. In reading a novel, don't take scenic description for granted since the furnishing out of a way of life carries potential meaning in every aspect, from the moral and religious down to the domestic and everyday. Within all narrative ordering there is also

an internal chronology, of youth and age, family generations, seasonal change, expectation and climax and retrospect, as the action shifts and turns; keep track alertly of timings and intervals and the calendar, including time-skips and flashbacks, and interventions (tacit or explicit) in the voice of the narrator or author. Small events may act as ironic preludes to large ones, just as echo-repeats of episodic features (sometimes widely separated) may covertly highlight small differences of great subsequent significance.

14. Similarly there are often internal maps and topographies which control spatial relations and movements, sometimes specific and literal, sometimes generic or symbolic, often combining all these aspects. Some texts will oscillate between alternate settings: town/country, Egypt/Rome; others will progress along lines of excursion, as in pilgrimage or picaresque narrative (*The Canterbury Tales, Joseph Andrews*, for example). Try to envisage the type of spatial mapping appropriate for a work that seems to imply relational space. The maps for Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* would be quite difficult to draw, which fact is itself informative. We can make moderately good guesses about the layout of the castle at Elsinore, but the elaborate gothic-style casements and passage-ways and dusky galleries of Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' never quite add up to coherent architecture. On a larger scale, the setting described in *King Lear* as 'A Heath', preceded by 'The open country', signifies principally by being beyond the map of comfort and civic disposition; Wuthering Heights, too, lies off the map of sociable order. By contrast the map for Pope's *Dunciad* has many specific aspects (see e.g., Aubrey L. Williams, *Pope's 'Dunciad'; A Study of its Meaning* [London, 1955], map pp. 34-5) (Caius Lib.: 821.5 POP/Wil), and Jane Austen's topography is mostly quite precise. The later novels of Dickens not infrequently develop intensive focal localities with only shadowy connection overall and in between, so that resolving the threads of the narrative can also mean finally making clear the synoptic mapping. Space carries meaning, and its variant codes need to be assimilated as a part of active envisagement.

15. Within scenic ensembles, likewise, conversation and dialogue will often carry evolving nuance well below the level of explicit verbal exchange. Remember again that historical reconstruction may be needed for recognition of tacit assumptions and habits of character, quite as much as for unfamiliar linguistic expression: politeness, and authority (for example), as regulatory decorums, are context-sensitive and also very period-specific. Furthermore, a large structure will often acquire resonance and self-challenge through loops of resemblance or part-repetition, one episode mirrored in another; often the recognition of a buried retrospect may be triggered by a detail of speech-usage or reminiscent turn of phrase. Different authors and kinds of text have their own signalling codes, and the alert reader needs to tune into these during the early stages of reading. Not to read Henry James or Virginia Woolf with this kind of alertness would be to read with one eye closed; indeed there are texts which only unfold a full inwardness when read closely for a second time, and which resonate further each time you return to them thereafter.

16. There are practical aids to alert attention and recall. First, when in reading you notice a feature, or recognise its recurrence, flip a switch in your mind which consciously recognises the noticing and stores it; hold it for just long enough to register exactly. Names, dates, facts and locations, costs and

sizes, siblings and weapons and forms of address, don't let them slip away and be lost. Memorise them. The same is true for turns of phrase, momentary ironies of usage, evasions, elaborated syntax or unusual figuration, verbal echoes and cadences, slowings, pointed vacancies and gaps. Your responsiveness to extremely local figments of writerly practice can be tuned up to acute precision. If you feel your mind is being cluttered, enlarge your retention span, practice to hold more, simultaneously and within accessible recall: this is a learnable skill, and you will need it. In certain cases you may come to know a text almost by heart, and really knowing the detail is the way its larger power will lodge fully and accurately in your deep memory.

17. Second, if you own the copy you are reading, work out a method of text-marking that will signal and record your moments of noticing features, and enable you to track them within the larger sequence. There is little point in simply underlining or high-lighting every significant moment or exchange, since you will end up with a meaningless plethora of interferences. As you begin to notice patterns, work out a code of marks that will enhance your subsequent recognition as well as enabling you to track back for later confirmations. Some longer notes will need to be made on separate sheets or in a notebook, but be sure to key them securely to the text locations to which they refer. On re-reading the text or after perusing a critical study you may want to add further layers of such annotation; again, keep all these notes safely together and key them precisely to the text.

18. A special note about facts, raw information and hard data. It will not do, just because we are part of what is vulgarly known as the Arts and Humanities sector of intellectual endeavour, to cultivate an insouciant blindness to unnuanced information. If a book for instance on the historical development of literacy presents numerical analysis and tabular data, perhaps including maps and listings of publishing outputs, don't assume that all you need is an overall impression. Focus your attention, work out comparisons and tendencies over time or across regions, set the dates in a chronological framework. Don't shy off numerical arguments or graphs or financial analysis, word-frequency counts, geologic mapping of landforms, family trees, elements of probability and permutation. Drawing inference from fact and using fact to support argument are non-trivial skills and require attentive practice. Only connect.

19. Reading closely a text of earlier historical date will present special problems. In addition to aspects mentioned above there are likely to be difficulties of language and vocabulary, which require to be tackled methodically. In many texts of whatever date there will be words which you will need to look up in a dictionary (preferably the multi-volume revised *Oxford English Dictionary*, or *OED2*), recording the results of your search in your text notes. But in earlier material, reaching back to Shakespeare and to Middle English, you will need to work with glossaries and special aids; here especially you will need to be watchful for words or phrases that look fully recognisable but where appearance conceals different meanings ('false friends'). Texts in foreign languages will present all the problems of vocabulary and grammar and idiom also complicated by features specific to historical period in ways often divergent from English counterparts, so that if

you are preparing for translation you will need to ponder the scope for stylistic cross-matching.

20. In all reading, the framework of interpretation is massively affected by historical period-location of text origin and its context in chronology; it is vital to seek out detailed up-to-date information and then build this into your reading consciousness and into the overviews by which you devise contexts and categories for the idea of a specific poem or play or novel which you are in course of forming. When was this book written? When was it published, and who were aimed for as its readers? What kind of effect did it have when it was brand-new; and how soon did it begin to seem old-fashioned? As your reading within a period becomes more extensive you will begin to recognise a currency of themes and issues, reflecting external events though often tacitly and by indirection; in modes like satire and political invective these connections are frequently hyper-active. Some textual commentaries will over-emphasise this aspect, others will barely mention it; by stages and through close study you will progressively develop your own judgement.

21. Remember that the composition of extended works may have run over months or years of planning and writing. Remember too that certain large works now considered as a unity were first published at successive dates in separate sections; also, the date of first publication may be considerably later that the date of completed composition. Not all poem-sequences were composed originally in the order of their current internal arrangement. Some revised texts differ in deep and complex ways from their earlier, original conceptions. Some works which we now think of as stable written texts were originally more like performance scripts, varying and unstable; Shakespeare is a notable example. Many Victorian novels were written for periodical issue in monthly instalments.

22. Dates of composition affect which kind of generic format was already known to a readership, and which not: *The Pilgrim's Progress* cannot be a novel because that form was not yet by that time a generic option. They also affect which section of an historical dictionary can have bearing on interpretation, and which semantic aspects or habits of diction are too early or too late to apply. Dates and connections give shape to the idea of a cultural community. Likewise, dates of publication mostly regulate when other authors can have been able to read a work by his or her contemporaries; although in certain cases and general conditions there was also extensive circulation of works in manuscript. Don't slide into the habit of reading in a chronological vacuum; history is not only chronology, but chronology is an important base-line and will help you to frame your interpretation as part of an active and wider historical understanding. Remember too that while historical 'periods' of literature can help to bring together aspects of a cultural era and give you a firm 'sense' of period characteristics, these 'periods' are also invented things, their boundaries notably artificial and misleading.

23. In severely challenging texts you may need to complete a stage-one reading almost completely in terms of looking up words and idioms and glossing them into your text copy or notes, practising your grasp of the basic language features and storing a full vocabulary and skeleton grammar into recognition memory. Then you will be ready for a stage-two reading, along the

sequence outlined above, and this second reading will in turn activate reconsideration of certain word-meanings and phrase usages as richer than as suggested by their glossed equivalents. Following through a good text commentary or set of editorial annotations will enable you to build up a texture of meaning context and signification, leading on to full analysis of structure.

24. When provoked by your own ignorance or uncertainty, make side-trips to improve your range of factual knowledge. Don't be constantly distracted from more important tasks; but note features that indicate gaps in information and, when more convenient, look them up. Place-names that you can't place should send you to a period-specific atlas, names of classical authors or composers or artists to appropriate reference works, as also evidently famous (but not yet to you) buildings, battles, *femmes fatales* and the like. If earlier units of length or monetary value are obscure and unsupplied with a text-note, find out how to convert them to current rates. Any feature which an author assumed would have been familiar in his time is worth a few minutes' curiosity, before you become hardened in indifference to how things are and how they were. What colour is the royal hue? When exactly and for whom is a passing-bell rung? What was the neck verse? The typical wingspan of a windhover? A mess of pottage? The Raft of the Medusa?

25. As with other staged reading tasks that lead from localised details to integration and to understanding of larger features, remember to retain as much as possible of this primary detail in accessible memory; it is wasteful and reckless to erase the detail once you think you know how it works, because if you do this you will never have well-prepared grounds for engaging in close discussion with others or for changing your mind. Remember too that your mental lexicon of words and ideas and figures of expression will need to be ordered historically, rather like the layout of *OED2*. All aspects of meaning within a culture constantly shift and evolve across historical time, by no means falling into convenient 'periods', as if *nature* meant one thing to 'the Augustans' and suddenly quite another thing to 'the Romantics', by some overnight sea-change. When you come to prepare for examinations these arts of memory, often sneered at, will confer rich benefits.

26. Reading poetry brings challenges of a yet more intricate nature. Some works in poetic form are extended structures, as in epic verse and poetic drama; some works present as single poems within implicit frames comprised by published collections, or within a generic evolution contributed to by a series of writers over time. Some poems locate themselves implicitly or explicitly within frames of religious belief or political controversy or by response to issues active within a current culture; some are working out problems inherited or modified from earlier writers. Gauging the frame historically is part of a sophisticated reading, the basis for examining specific features of poetic argument and stylistic performance. The requirement for steady vigilance of attention will be high: don't read for too long, or you will stop noticing subtle or unusual features. Again, learning the linguistic range of a poet, characteristic and innovative figurative usages, metrical and syntactical controls over tone and mood and levels of address, will require close scrutiny of word-by-word construction, explored through repeated

readings and held in consciousness and memory by carefully recorded text-notes.

27. Good editorial annotation and commentary will help to focus historical understanding, but the high potential in poetic texts for multiple and implicit word meaning, and citation of one text by another, will make dictionary work harder to accomplish successfully. Within the historical span indicated in *OED2* there is often plausible overlap into many if not most of the recorded meaning possibilities, and a very capacious verbal memory is required for this kind of reading. Good reading skills can be built up by layer after layer of focussed attention, across different collections and different writers within a cultural moment, but only if there is good retention of detail in specific writerly and historical contexts. Remember, one active reading helps another, and builds up a general repertoire of interpretation.

28. When you approach a major work by an author who is new to you, or a first example of an unfamiliar genre, it is likely you will find yourself in a strange world, without a map to point the way. You will be tempted to consult some potted student guide, or simplified introduction, to get your bearings before you start. Try not to do this. If you take the plunge and make a few pilot readings, into the text and roundabout within, you may quite quickly pick up the world brought into view and the tone of the author's presence. Sometimes you will be able to open windows for yourself by reading other works by the same author in different modes: Chaucer's translation of Boethius, Donne's sermons, Fielding's burlesque farces, Keats's letters. The best guide to Sidney's *Arcadia* is his *Astrophel and Stella*; and vice versa. On the threshold of *Paradise Lost*, pause to read *Comus*. The best guide to a difficult poem by Emily Dickinson is other poems by her. Reading of this kind, to get your bearings, may often be done at speed and over a wide, excursive range, and the aim may be to gain familiarity with a whole areas of writing practice by mostly unconscious assimilation. Here you are not so much reading a specific text, with focussed attention, as initially ranging and exploring. But even in this mode try not to browse artlessly: keep a record of what you read, be conscious of when and for whom it was written, observe how and in what ways the author is active within the text.

29. Long and complex works present special reading problems of their own, because the overt architecture of their internal dispositions may not fully express the implicit patterns of development, the features of elaboration and recurrence which comprise the reasons why the work in hand needs and uses (if it does) the extended scale on which it is constructed. There will likely have been generic and historical expectations which will have regulated the original readers' frame of mind, including the shadow of influence from previous grand projects; there will be authorial habits of dividing and joining the sections of the work's overall sequence; there may also have been complications of serial accretion or revision in course of the history of composition. But much more locally, a beginning reader needs to find the stylistic profile and rhythm of a big book, to tune in and learn to recognise the staged-out signposts between one section and another, including anticipations and retrospects, preparatives and sudden climactic intensifications. There may be recurrent shifts of voice; the author may or may not adopt a presence within the text-world, openly or by manoeuvres of tone.

30. The major sequence-format may be discursive (Browne's *Religio Medici*) or narrational (*David Copperfield*) or dramaturgic (Dryden's *All For Love*) or pastiche-ironical (*The Rape of the Lock*), or more tacitly recurrent by horizon of theme (Auden's *Poems*, 1930), or overtly hybrid and fragmentational (*The Waste Land*). Sometimes the overall shape is itself problematic: why is *Middlemarch* constructed in the elaborately recursive form of its multiple strands, what is the fundamental story it has to tell? What is the self-consciousness about formal procedure in Beckett's *Watt* doing to the overt narration, and to what purpose? As you gear up to read, over what will be a series of strenuous sessions, take the measure of the set-up, the characteristic features that allow you to recognise what's going on, the way a reader is paced along from entry at beginning, through elaborations of middle thickness and counter-passage, towards the convergence of outcome and ending. You will work out your own tactics, but it's along these lines that a big book gets itself successfully read.

31. Reading texts intensively or extensively will often bring you to recognise specific words that seem to bear highly significant charges of meaning, as maybe even a stylistic fingerprint, and you may wish to see how else these same words function elsewhere within the author's work. This will take you to the humble but instructive concordance, an alphabetic compendium of an author's complete vocabulary, each usage listed in brief context. You may need to check from the preface or introduction whether the source-text(s) are in original old spelling, or a modernised equivalent. Concordances have been compiled for most major authors, including of course such as Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson, Milton, Pope and Keats, as well as for numerous others; Caius Library is especially well-stocked with these valuable reference aids (enter title keywords 'concordance' plus '[authorname]' in a catalogue search, to locate the one you need). Alternatively, word-searches may be conducted via an appropriate database: for example, it is possible to call up LIterature-ONline (at http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk) from any network-linked computer terminal and to limit your search(es) to one author (if included in the source listings), thus nominating your own author-concordance. Our Library staff will be happy to assist you with this. Eventually you will begin to develop from your reading your own minimal select concordances, carried in your personal memory as a kind of resonating echo-chamber.

32. Another class of features in the literary works that you read and study is comprised in the resources of form and structure, the devices which are the working framework of how writing is set up and set out. Sometimes these are very local features: in poetic texts the uses of stanza-form and rhyme, for example. Sometimes the whole generic ordering of a work is involved: what formal rules of construction make a Shakespearean play a tragedy, or 'Lycidas' a pastoral threnody. Be curious about these forms and their historical development, and learn to observe and follow out the kinds of effect that they can have. There are complex traditions which require epic poems to be pitched up into the grand style, as for example Spenser's *The Faerie Qveene*, thus giving point to the inversion of stylistic features in mock-epic such as Pope's *The Dunciad*. Some verse-forms are tightly determined, like the sonnet; others, like the pindarique ode, are looser and more variable. Plays are constructed by act and scene divisions (often tampered with by

modernising editors); alternations of verse and prose within poetic drama follow their own practice as rhetorical markers, contributing to effects of pace and level of utterance. Novels are divided into chapters and often internally into books; earlier fiction is also often shaped into episodes, or narrated as an exchange of letters. Stylistic features like the elaborated paragraph in Sidney's prose, and the periodic sentence in Johnson's, follow patterns which are partly inherited and partly innovative. The fragmentation and pastiche-subversion of these previously more stable conventions also comprise some of the stylistic resources of modernist text-practice.

33. As you accumulate reading experience you will come to understand how these forms regulate the kinds of effect that a work can be intended to have. You will observe how the heroic couplet form controls meaning and gives point to its dispositions. You will recognise how two different traditions of sonnet-form develop side by side, and how for instance Keats experiments with these forms; how a lyrical ballad is not a ballad of the form that it adapts and imitates. The performance conventions regarding dramatic soliloquy have consequences for how we read such climactic moments and recognise their force. Many large-scale effects of irony are transmitted through burlesque of kind; *Gulliver's Travels* mimics the patient explanatory tones of a touristic handbook or travelogue. Sometimes a major question about form is revealingly difficult to answer: just what kind of poem is Eliot's *The Waste Land*? Gradually as you extend your reading you will be able to grasp these features and understand them, which will in turn introduce you to the study of prosody, of dramatic construction and theory, of the evolution of mixed and experimentally disturbed or extended formal conventions through parody and imitation.

34. Remember that reading intelligently also includes reading aloud, vocalising and performing a text as a spoken sequence of pitch and in-tonation, of modulated phrase contour and rhythm and tone or tones of voice. Different kinds and period-styles of composition aim at different modes of voicing, using sound and pace and emphasis for different kinds of effect. Metre and rhyme give shape to verse in ways best explored by reading aloud, just as wit and the nuances of comedy or satire come alive in skilled control of vocal inflection. Precise marking of irony or parody often depends on recognising the tones which signal these effects. Actors and singers are not the only ones who should practise to become versatile in these text-performance skills, because spoken utterance is an acutely testing aspect of formal interpretation, especially in regard to the patterns of writing in its rhythms and cadences, and in its styles of social delivery. Experienced readers can also develop skills to hear the sound-aspects of a text silently in their own minds, just as musicians can read over a score and 'hear' its sonorities. Try to learn some poems or passages by heart; try out your powers of recognition and delivery by reading aloud to yourself or to each other, and then estimating how fully you have been able to catch the voice-qualities of the text. A person who can read aloud *Venus and Adonis* or *The Rape of the Lock* or *Little Gidding*, and can do so with apt verve and insight, is already well advanced in literary understanding.

35. Reading works in foreign languages can open your horizons to a whole range of new experiences, and even if imperfect fluency makes you a slow

reader you should try to keep up with some reading in the languages that you know. When reading poetry in a foreign tongue it sometimes helps to use a well-prepared bilingual edition, with foreign and English texts on facing pages. It can also be instructive to read some foreign translations of English texts: major Shakespearean soliloquies in French or German translation can disclose interesting features on both sides that merit pondering. Some of your most important long-term reading must inevitably be in translation; for many of you this will include the Greek and Latin classics, the great Russian novelists, the works of Dante and the Italian humanists, and so on. Reading in translation may be a kind of second-best in one way, but in other ways it demonstrates the universality of the literary instinct. Before setting yourself the challenge of Homer's *Iliad*, or Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, seek advice about available translations and then, as always, make a session plan that will guide the project to completion.

36. Certain foundational texts are constantly implicit in the background for all literary writing in English of whatever date. Central among all others are the Bible and the Prayer Book, prominent in devotional or religious writing but pervasive everywhere. Sometimes the biblical reminiscence is verbal, sometimes thematic, sometimes certain structures (such as father-son relationships, or prophecy-fulfilment sequences) provide an active undercurrent. Again it is necessary to be historically alert: for Sidney and Shakespeare the English Bible was the Geneva Version, and not the new translation of 1611. A student of literature who has not read the English Bible needs to use moments where a text requires it to make a brief detour from other work, and to read a major section. For reading in Middle English texts this practice will be a significant necessity, and it will be hard to make sense of George Herbert (or of George Eliot) without this dimension.

37. Other major pivotal texts comprise persuasive examples and warnings for writers that follow after, throwing long shadows which sometimes shew up in later works by tacit borrowings or by wary avoidance or even both. Thus Sidney read Spenser, Herrick read Jonson; Wordsworth read Milton, Keats read Shakespeare; Eliot read Tennyson and (quasi-)read Dante. Coleridge read everything; Larkin denied significant reading of anything, with less than candour. A student can follow and reconstruct these powerful, sometimes adversative, readings within the history of writerly career development only at a late stage of patient study, but following the opening stages outlined in these notes will lead in due course to the grand overview.

38. All reading that is explicitly or implicitly part of a scheme of study comprises also a self-challenge to critical appraisal and judgement. Alertness here is critical alertness, estimating quality of writing and power of intelligence and insight and imagination. Reading in this aspect has to serve two functions: to acquire the reading experience which provides the material for judgement, and also progressively to develop the standards and values by which such judgement is directed. Certain bodies of work are widely regarded as exemplary, as measures for other estimations; but the independent reader should take little on trust and should aim to test the attitudes of earlier reputation and current critique against an independent personal valuation. Each strenuous act of alert text reading will adjust your scale, and at the concluding stage of such reading you will need to take time to take stock and

work out your reasons as an interim assessment. This kind of critical review will feed naturally and productively into your essay-writing work, and finally into confident examination submissions.

39. At this stage you will be ready to measure your responses and insights in the context of supervision discussion and the arguments presented in lectures. Remember to guard your independence closely; you can of course learn from differing views and sometimes you may in consequence shift or alter your own; but the test is always your first-hand direct judgement of the texts, rather than the say-so of some persuasive critic or teacher. This introduces another kind of reading, that of historical and critical studies. Here too you will need to read with focussed attention and take careful notes, keyed to specific stages in the critical argument, just as you do at lectures; but here too you need to be constantly testing the critic's opinions against your own and against the texts. It is good practice to have the critical book and the relevant text side by side on your desk, so that you can shift from one to the other step by step. As you take notes, be careful to keep your own views recognisably separate from your summary of the critic's, and if you copy out a passage from the critical study make sure that you transcribe it correctly and note down the reference, even (and especially) if you disagree with it or are doubtful.

40. Living with uncertainty of judgement or of personal estimation is a condition you should learn to accept and manage. There is no advantage whatever in hopping to snap judgements or making up your mind before you are ready to do so, even if a supervision essay deadline invites the setting up of arguments leading to at least provisional conclusions. Some really deep general questions may need to lie open and unresolved in your mind for a long time. Try to pinpoint the areas of for you currently important doubtfulness, to focus on the options and issues and how your text-encounters localise the challenges to thought. For example, what are the theological or political responsibilities of the writer to engage in the issues of his or her time? How far can a text win your admiration while never gaining your intellectual assent to its beliefs? What about plays that assume the subordinate status of women or submissiveness to the idea of power--or do they? Does *Piers Plowman* strike deeper into the reader's moral imagination that *Sir Gawain*? Is Sidney a great writer or 'just' a manipulator of courtliness? Was Dryden intelligent? Is Jane Austen generous? Was Arnold part-right to criticise the Romantic poets for not knowing enough? What was free verse free from? Are Eliot's plays all humbug? These are sample questions, not self-evidently the right ones to ask or rightly framed, and in any case not answerable directly or quickly. But recall also that an unsettled question should be kept active within your thought horizons, and not pushed aside as beyond useful enquiry: the question itself may start to change its shape as over time you reflect upon it. Being in productive doubt does not mean being in a muddle or putting off strenuous thinking; but premature certainty is often a sign of weakness and dogmatism.

41. Remember finally that reading is not merely the servant of study, still less of intensively hurried scrutinies. Works of literature were not composed as exam fodder nor as exercise machines for budding critical acrobats. Most substantial works (not necessarily to be equated with long ones) were directed

towards an adult audience of readers with various experience of the world, and not to teenagers fresh out of school. Some of the novels and plays and poems currently being produced by contemporary writers, mostly not yet within anyone's syllabus, will take their due place as landmark classics, deeply characterising the age we live in. Literary works aim to give pleasure of the most complex kind possible, and indeed to define pleasure and to extend its scope. When a reading of text has proceeded by laborious stages within the test-rig of detailed study, pause to allow the overall effect to integrate back into a coherent human reading, and ponder whether your life may even have been changed, just a little, or your beliefs about large questions; whether your habits of feeling have been flattered or boastfully challenged, or whether your relation to the text builds up a kind of trust. This aspect is what you will take away with you when all the study is finished, and it should last you through a lifetime.

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42. I add also this postscript, because your responsibilities to whatever long-term benefits you derive from reading with insight and enhanced understanding some of the world's finest books do not end as you depart from Caius. When you read and sing to your young children at bed-time, and buy them picture-books for their early birthdays, remember how susceptible are those of tender years and how much your example will mean to them. If you read aloud to them with humour and truth, and prefer reading matter (choose it yourself) which is not slick child-fodder even when simple and direct and pitched right for young minds; and do not allow them to be drawn into a fear or scorn of poetry, and take them all to Christmas pantos which offer sparks of witty imagination, and give good book-presents to nieces and family because you shew that you care about them (both the recipients and the books); then part of the longer-term inwardness of your literary education, a far cry from writing essays and splitting critical hairs, approaches thus a fulfilment which will start to transmit deep values across the generations. That's called being human. Then later you can lure them into kids' libraries and bookshops, buy them writing-notebooks in which they can compose stories to read back to you, and songs to sing and little playlets for family festivals, and so make all this a natural part of their young lives; and of yours also.

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