

*The Practice of Reading*, by Denis Donoghue

reviewed by [Richard Rosengarten](#) in the [September 22, 1999](#) issue

Denis Donoghue wants us to get back to reading literature as literature. He indicts the politicized criticism now dominating literary study and proposes an alternative that emphasizes the practice of reading over ideological theories about it. His opening chapter, "Curriculum Vitae," sketches a fascinating portrait of his younger reading self, deeply engaged by literature and by the question of how to make sense of his reading experience.

Donoghue is troubled by the way the critical approaches that encouraged him to read for the sake of reading—the work of T. S. Eliot, R. P. Blackmur and the New Critics—have been swept aside by poststructuralist movements. He would approve of Harold Bloom's label: these movements are part of "the school of resentment."

Donoghue offers a series of readings that demonstrate his seemingly straightforward proposition that we read literature as literature, not as politics, ethics or theology. Though his illustrative canon is almost exclusively modern and Western, he captures the rich range of this canon: from Shakespeare to Swift, Wordsworth, Pater, Joyce, Yeats and Cormac McCarthy.

We should read literature, his argument goes, on its own terms: poems, plays and novels have purposes and devices that are intrinsic to their quality as works of the imagination. Our job as readers is to bring to them our unadulterated attention, not our social, political or theological views. Their intrinsic literary qualities can then work on our sensibilities, educating us in humane sympathy for otherness.

Behind Donoghue's argument is a compelling reverence for the text. Also lurking in the background is an unstated theological agenda. Donoghue makes it most manifest near the end of the book, in a passing comment on T. S. Eliot: "The fact that Eliot has to say what poetry is by saying what it is not should not be held against him; no one has done better than Eliot with the description of the intrinsic quality of a work of literature." For Donoghue, literary criticism is at its best when it talks about what literature is not. This parallels the classic Christian tradition of negative theology, which holds that we humans can best describe the intrinsic

quality of the deity by saying what God is not, rather than presuming to say what God is.

Donoghue's critical vocabulary is chock full of religious language; his favored verb for the act of interpretation is "to divine" the text, and he frequently characterizes the pinnacle reading experience as a moment of grace. That religion regularly makes his list of the ideologies that inhibit good reading puzzles me. Explicitly recognizing that his rationale is manifestly theological could only enhance his argument. It would then engage powerful new conversation partners who are not kindred spirits (Simone Weil is the most obvious). And Donoghue could then explore the kinds of theological assumptions that necessarily—perhaps even appropriately—ground "intrinsic" textual reading.