

A PRACTICE IN READING

BY RANDY LEE CUTLER

There is no frigate like a book/ To take us lands away
— Emily Dickinson, 1830–1886

Right now, with the paper or digital edition of this magazine in your hands, your brain is accomplishing an amazing feat. As your eyes proceed jerkily across the page you are recognizing letters, morphemes and phonemes, quickly harvesting words out of the reading field. Received through your retina, these signs raise the curtain on a world of ideas, stories and the inner workings of your imagination. Scientifically speaking, the visual recognition of words begins in the left anterior occipital lobe.¹ From here, the process gets complicated. Some experts argue that our brain proceeds from recognizing a word straight to its meaning while others suggest that we access pronunciation first, transforming the letters into sounds, and then sound into meaning. Neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene says, “All writing systems oscillate between an accurate representation of sound and the fast transmission of meaning [...] In fact two information processing pathways coexist and supplement each other while we read.”²

Reading is mysterious. More than an activity, it is a practice that incorporates a variety of biological processes, personal behaviours and cultural encounters. Not concerned here with *what* is being read, I offer a provisional consideration of some historical, physiological and phenomenological fragments, as an emergent practice in reading. In *Reading: A Socio-physiological Outline*, Georges Perec describes it as an act, "...and I wish to speak of this act and this act alone: of what constitutes it and what surrounds it: not of what it produces (the text, what we read), nor of what precedes it (writing and its choices, publishing and its choices...). In short, something like an economy of reading seen from an ergological (physiology, muscular effort) and socio-ecological perspective (its spatio-temporal setting)."³ Regardless of the content, Perec's writing is always a sensorial experience of innovative wordplay, a sheer joy to read, and endlessly accommodating to the reader. And yet, despite our ability to articulate particularities of the practice, reading and the magical apprehension of words remains mysterious.

The Latin *legere*, "to read," originally meant to gather, collect, pick out or choose, and the Greek *legein* offers to select, collect or enumerate. In this sense, to *read* is to sample words. But as you read this, you are well aware that a lot more is happening than simply picking and choosing. English is one of the few western European languages that does not derive its verb for "to read" from Latin. Compare, for example, *leggere* in Italian, *lire* in French, and *lesen* in German. The word *read* comes from the Old English verb *rdan*, or *radan*, meaning to explain, advise or interpret. Here, etymology offers a model for reading that opens up the experience to a kind of internal conferencing where the reader deliberates and consults her own databank to decipher potential motifs, rhythms and connotations. More than gathering, collecting, picking and choosing, the Old English origins of "to read" signify a practice of deliberating in and through language, translating written symbols into meaning and subjectivity. Surely reading is also a form of incorporation of the external in one's own subjectivity; breaking down and transmuting the foreign substance into something that is familiar. To put a mathematical spin on it, reading is one part gathering letters, two parts deciphering and assimilating signs, and many more parts conjuring; it apprehends the emergence of thought coming into being as it is being read.

However, reading is so much more than understanding text. As Alberto Manguel lovingly recounts in *A History of Reading* (1996), "reading letters on a page is only one of its many guises... the lover blindly reading the loved one's body at night, under the sheets; the psychiatrist helping patients read their own bewildering dreams; the Hawaiian fisherman reading the ocean currents by plunging a hand into the water; the farmer reading the weather in the sky [...] all these share with book-readers the craft of deciphering and translating signs."⁴ A practice in reading requires regular exercise, invoking the magic of signs, knowing the self through a private and silent encounter, and entering into a social contract of and through language.

It is intriguing that Manguel states, "We read to understand, or begin to understand. We cannot do but read. Reading, almost as much as breathing, is our essential function."⁵ Reading and breathing are phenomenological, being and thinking at once through the senses within the flow of time. Even though we breathe automatically, there is, for many, a desire to practise breathing so as to realize a state of mindfulness and relaxation. What is required is a different kind of attention, focus and intentionality: a depth of engagement in the mind and the body, a corporeal cognition of being present with oneself. A similar quality of care and attentiveness is required of a practice in reading. Admittedly, we use the same verb to describe scanning pages on the Internet for specific information and skimming a text to quickly identify the main ideas. Practice, whether breathing or reading, suggests repeated engagement for the purpose of acquiring skill or proficiency. It implies a performance of doing through which the process can bring about transformation. Perhaps it is useful to remember that practice often references religion, yoga or repeating one's musical scales. More profane than sacred, a practice in reading in everyday life suggests the possibility of illumination⁶, and yet even the highest meditative state is not necessarily liberating. Instead of attaining a complete cessation of thought, one might consider the expansive mindfulness and embodiment generated through this modality. An unfinished, infinite project, reading is always in process, a desire for desire, a foray into an endless rendezvous with the page and the self. Exhilarated by the phenomenological potential, I experience this impending pleasure of the text whenever I cross the threshold of a library, bookstore or

magazine shop. Butterflies flutter in my stomach, part of my astonishment that something written hundreds of years ago, in another language, somewhere far away, is reaching my eyes, coursing through my left anterior occipital lobe, where I can then marvel at the author's intention, thought and style of expression. Breathing and pulse rates quicken as each title, book spine or table of contents offers new avenues of exploration. Through the classification system and arrangement of material, I experience chance encounters with books I wasn't seeking and didn't know I lusted after, which then alter the direction of future tastes and diversions. Muscles tense in the thighs, hips and hands; spasms may begin. A reciprocal intertwining of affection inhabits this erotic hospitality of thought. The excitement builds through a kind of polymorphously perverse relation of aroma, tactility, heft, paper quality, typeface and layout. The sculptural qualities of a book excite proprioceptive sensation: a dance of axons and dendrites firing across neurons, as a complex arousal of sense perceptions unfolds in the thrill of the chase and its literate embrace.

More often than not, reading is a practice of being alone, a kind of pleasure in isolation. Whether reading a physical object or in the digital realm, this practice requires a certain degree of immersion and perhaps an ability to abstract oneself from immediate surroundings. Reading isn't necessarily a solitary activity—consider the communal spaces of libraries, public transportation, cafés, the beach—but it is an individual one. Silent reading, which we now take as the default mode, was a relatively new phenomenon in the 4th century AD. The idea of reading silently to oneself was once so unusual that, in the year 384 after St. Augustine had paid an afternoon visit to Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, he noted such reading manners in his *Confessions*. "The implication is that this method of reading, this silent perusing of the page, was in his time something out of the ordinary, and that normal reading was performed out loud," notes Manguel. "Even though instances of silent reading can be traced to earlier dates, not until the tenth century does this manner of reading becomes usual in the West."⁷ With silent reading, one can occupy an interior space where each sentence connects to the larger narrative but also to the reader's own library of thoughts, memories, emotions and modes of reading. Individual reading practices thus reflect how we inhabit our relation to language and its aesthetic

pleasures. A personal encounter with reading emerges between the lines as we choose the speed, the quality of our interest, as well as the tone and cadence.

With the increasing dominance of silent reading evolves the emergence of the individual subject into linguistic spaces that produce effects of selfhood and self-transformation. In part, we read to find traces of our own autobiographies in a bodily encounter with words, books and libraries. Through this practice, we encounter ourselves anew in multiple dimensions and temporalities. This conception is echoed in Roland Barthes' 1967 essay "The Death of the Author," in which he establishes the reader as the producer of meaning in a text: "The modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now. [...] The text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture."⁸ In this encounter, the text becomes entwined with our own subjectivity, our own bodies. Does this mean that we inevitably read the text against itself? Rather than a transparency of meaning, the text is revealed in a revelatory presence of thought. Reading opens awareness of the self as always emergent rather than fixed. The reader apprehends something that is just coming into being as it is being read, translating written symbols as they relate to our own lived experience. Read the same text twice and you inevitably get two different interpretations via two different selves that have mutated in the interim.

Barthes' remark about the tissue of citations and the thousand sources of culture assumes new implications in the age of the Internet and digital processing. Reading online is an altogether distinct experience from reading a book, both in the apparatus of engagement and in how our bodies take up the encounter. Do we read with full attention or is digital apprehension merely a matter of scanning and skimming? How does a particular technology inform the attendant awareness that we bring to it? Motoko Rich in *The New York Times* writes, "On paper, text has a predetermined beginning, middle and end, where readers focus for a sustained period on one author's vision. On the Internet, readers skate through cyberspace at will and, in effect, compose their own beginnings, middles

and ends."⁹ Some interesting questions have been posed about the potential of e-readers, particularly whether or not the digital-reading brain reads differently and whether or not it actually accesses deep levels of knowledge, understanding and feelings. Books, archives and library spaces have all shifted in fascinating ways, producing emergent communities and new forms of reading where our brain's circuitry is transformed by the tissue of citations resulting from the thousand sources of digital culture.

Ken Pugh, a cognitive neuroscientist at Yale who has studied brain scans of children reading states that "Reading a book, and taking the time to ruminate and make inferences and engage the imaginative processing, is more cognitively enriching, without a doubt, than the short little bits that you might get if you're into the 30-second digital mode."¹⁰ Reading on the Internet may affect the brain's hard wiring, and yet this assessment does not fully take into account some of the innovative features of e-readers (e.g. iPad, Kindle, Kobo), which, in addition to being able to carry a whole library in one device, allow the annotation of a text and introduction of digital forms of marginalia. Whether public (free) or private (for paying members) collections, digital library portals such as Netlibrary, Digital Book Index, Digital Library Federation, and Google Books, to name a few, have allowed increased and quick access to e-books. Certainly the PDF has made a range of material accessible and digital newspapers enjoy a robust audience. Of course, this access to digital material is contingent on a more widespread access to e-readers and the Internet. And the jury is still deliberating on the potential merits of reading in the digital realm. And yet the assertion that books are more cognitively enriching may not acknowledge the profound ways that rumination might occur beyond analogue processing.

Certainly the evolution of publishing and wireless environments heralds new potential for deciphering written symbols. Examples such as New York artists Dexter Sinister's "Just-In-Time Workshop & Occasional Bookstore," which models a "Just-In-Time" economy of print production, runs counter to the contemporary assembly-line realities of large-scale publishing. This involves avoiding waste by working on-demand, utilizing local cheap machinery, considering alternate distribution strategies, and collapsing distinctions of editing, design, production and distribution into one efficient activity."¹¹ Similarly, with outlets in

Portland, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Toronto and Vancouver, Publication Studio produces print-on-demand books and offers opportunities for reproducing original work to artists and writers: "We use any means possible to help writers and artists reach a public: physical books; a digital commons (where anyone can read and annotate our books for free); eBooks; and unique, lavish social events with our writers and artists in many cities."¹² Attending to the social life of the book, projects such as Publication Studio and Dexter Sinister's Just-In-Time Workshop & Occasional Bookstore represent a practice in reading that responds to a desire for community, whether through analogue or digital platforms.

As Manguel writes in the conclusion of *A History of Reading*, "In any case, the vastness of the subject and the limitations of the author [make this study]... seem mysteriously erratic and hopelessly incomplete."¹³ A practice in reading encompasses many possible trajectories, too many to fully explore here. But I want to extend a little further the discussion on the ways in which the history of technology has informed how we read. The evolution from clay tablets to papyrus scrolls to the parchment codex format (with multiple quires or gatherings), and more recently mass-produced printed books, continues to shift our relationship with the materiality of ideas, deeply affecting our phenomenological encounter with text. The 15th-century phenomenon of Johannes Gutenberg's printing press with its moveable type led to an explosion of printing activities and the increasing availability of books to a newly formed readership. It also encouraged widespread literacy and the ownership of books. In an uncanny turn of events, the way we read digitally by scrolling through text loops back to earlier forms of reading. Contemporary encounters with computers are reminiscent of the archaic practice of reading scrolls first used in Eastern Mediterranean civilizations. For example, Hebrew Torah scrolls were intended for repeated reading rather than a continuous once-only use. This makes sense considering the four simultaneous levels of interpretation necessary to Talmudic study: literal sense, limited meaning, rational elaboration and occult secret mystical meaning.¹⁴ In online environments, the entire text is also virtually present, though not wholly seen as we "scroll" up or down the screen. Though I doubt that there are the equivalent and simultaneous levels of reading, the persistence of scrolls, scrolling, and the

thousand sources of culture calls for a constant rearticulation and continued critical receptivity to what lies ahead, whether in the multiplicity of forms, the flexibility of materials and/or the innovation of the user.

Complex forms of apprehension are not necessarily echoed in the digital encounter, and yet there is the potential for expansiveness in both its analogue and digital forms. Upon first encountering the philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari, I experienced a revelation in reading: a door opened to what were for me entirely new forms of perception. Brian Massumi's *Translator's Foreword* actually offers instructions on how to read the text: "How should *A Thousand Plateaus* be played? When you buy a record there are always cuts that leave you cold. You skip them. You don't approach a record as a closed book that you have to take or leave. Other cuts you may listen to over and over again. They follow you."¹⁵ Thus the book might be read or played like a record, as an open system that can be entered at any point and not necessarily read from beginning to end in sequential order. While reading a book like playing a vinyl record is now perhaps an outmoded metaphor for many, the potential of discontinuous and nonlinear experience is profound and ongoing. It can mean that we read what other people think even as the primary material is being accessed and before the last page has been read. Whether print or digital, there is a pleasure in cross-referencing, chance encounters and journeying to unknown destinations. Without a doubt, one can get lost in both a physical object and in cyberspace. And yet the kind of absorptive reading that is experienced with a self-contained, page-turning book is a distinct practice. The phenomenology of seeing and feeling is an intrinsic part of perception; the weight of the tome, the slimness of a volume, the quality of the binding are all part of its pleasure. In advance of the digital, Deleuze and Guattari foretell hyperlinking, suggesting that we can surf a text out of sequence, follow our own idiosyncratic reading habits, and experience novel forms of immersion.

Poststructuralist explorations into multiplicities, tissues and flows anticipate the emergent experiences now afforded by digital technologies where reading is understood as a series of slippages among different registers and temporalities of experience. For more than two millennia, we have read the sounds as well as the meaning of morphemes and phonemes, deliberating and consulting our own

databanks to decipher potential connotations. With physiological effort, and through diverse cultural contexts, meaning is conjured out of the magic of signs as we write the self through the social contract of language. With the emergence of e-readers and digital libraries, we are witnessing a shift not only in our access to reading material but in how our neural network reads and processes information. A practice in reading is an emergent experience, hospitable to expansive mindfulness and embodiment, a desire for community, and a personal transformation that is always in process. ×

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Stanislas Dehaene, "...And particularly the circumvolutions of the occipital pole, starting at the base of the cuneus, as well as those of the lingual and fusiform lobules." *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention*, (New York: Viking, 2009), 60.
- 2 Dehaene, 38.
- 3 Georges Perec, "Reading: A Sociophysiological Outline," *Species of Spaces and Other pieces*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 174-185.
- 4 Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 7.
- 5 Manguel, 7.
- 6 See Walter Benjamin's essay "Surrealism" where he ruminates on the relationship between reading and profane illumination. "The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. Not to mention the most terrible drug—ourselves—which we take in solitude. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 190.
- 7 Manguel, 43.
- 8 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 145-146.
- 9 Motoko Rich, "The Future of Reading: Online, R U Really Reading?," *The New York Times*, Published: July 27, 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/27/books/27reading.html>: accessed June 15, 2011.
- 10 Rich
- 11 Dexter Sinister, <http://www.dextersinister.org>: accessed June 26, 2011.
- 12 <http://www.publicationstudio.biz/>: accessed June 26, 2011.
- 13 Manguel, 321.
- 14 Manguel, 90.
- 15 Brian Massumi, "Translators Foreword: The Pleasure of Philosophy," in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum, 1987), xiv.