Reading with the Body and the Bodies of Books

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1. The essential function of reading

Our 'reflex' of sitting and listening to (and then, later, reading) stories told by a storyteller, and thus letting ourselves be transported into the story's other realm is certainly shaped by millennia, therefore being a culturally ingrained practice. This accounts for the pleasure we take in our 'inaction' when we are 'transported' by the reading experience.

In *A History of Reading* (1997), which is at the same time a story of his own formation as a reader, Alberto Manguel argues that reading is as essential as breathing. Anthropologically speaking, the author claims that reading precedes writing (and when there were no humans writing yet, reading had as objects the encoded mysteries of nature). Manguel writes that:

> A society can exist – many do exist – without writing, but no society can exist without reading. According to the ethnologist Philippe Descola, societies without writing have a linear sense of time, while in societies called literate the sense of time is cumulative; both societies move within those different but equally complex times by reading the multitude of signs the world has to offer (Manguel 1997: 7).

It follows that the essential function of reading is a consequence of our basic need to make out and understand the signs of the world around us in the first place. As far as he is concerned, Manguel contends that learning how to read was his 'rite of passage,' since for most of the literate societies, learning how to read marks 'the beginning of the social contract' (Manguel 1997: 7).

More often than not, the literature that we read is about writing and reading. A league of characters in fiction finds the activity of making out signs or reading messages problematic. Pip, an orphan and the main character in Dickens's *Great Expectations* reads the names of his parents on their tombstones and fantasises their looks in the very opening of the book. Lockwood, one of the narrators in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* strives to decipher the characters, large and small, scratched on the ledge of a window and covering every inch left blank in a Testament until his eyes close and then open again to a sense of nausea at the

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profuse handwriting, complemented by a funny sketch. So mysterious are the written notes Lockwood tries to make out that they give the impression of hieroglyphics. Edgar Allen Poe wrote his short story 'The Man of the Crowd' on the unreadability of a human face in the crowd, thus associating the reading of micro-expressions with the reading of a book. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* the characters look up to make out the letters drawn in the sky by an aeroplane, and their difficulty suggests the protean and ungraspable nature of modernity and of the modern city. Writers as diverse as Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie write about the reading of pictures. Indeed, many writers are fascinated by the reading underpinning their writing and by the problems raised by the process of writing, while the readers of their books identify themselves with the stance of their characters as readers and writers.

2. When we read what we like we engage in it body and soul. The pleasure of reading print

Imaginative and creative writing has a long tradition of giving us comfort and pleasure. The sequencing of words leaves strong impressions upon us since they are capable of stirring reactions in our souls and bodies. Many words have multiple senses and, in each reader, senses are adorned with a hallo of images, impressions and subtle emotions. The joy of reading a printed book comes from the pleasant tactile sensation of touching its covers, feeling it in one's hands, weighing it, turning its pages, bookmarking it with a finger, leafing it, finding one's way through it, smelling fresh or old print. The haptic perceptions indicate that reading is a physical activity which engages our body.

The notes we jot down on page margins are a record of our thoughts in response to what we read, but at the same time, like the words printed on the page, they are material traces we leave on the book's body. This material nature of the transaction of embodied thoughts may suggest that the age-old dichotomy between body and mind is false. The mind itself is related to the brain, which is material. The words on the page are material, although at the same time their matter is not the concrete objects or the abstract concepts they signify. Likewise, the body of the book and the reader's body intermingle through words, which are the signs and traces of their bodies. The reader's notes on the book's pages are a very concrete expression of material and intellectual intimacy. By comparison, the notes and highlights we can make on an e-book is a rather impersonal and cold affair. My hand leaves no trace there. The trace is generated by the circuitry. My body does not interact with the e-book's body. The contact is digital, distant, feeling as an altogether different kind of contact.

In his book *Reading and the Body. The Physical Practice of Reading* (2015), Thomas McLaughlin shows that cognitive and neural sciences have entered into dialogue with literary theory, questioning the simplistic body/mind dualism, and showing that reading is physical in as much as it is a work of consciousness and cognition.

Once discovered, the pleasure of reading becomes one of the most gratifying pastimes of our life. When we read a short story, a novel or a poem, our feelings are stirred, we are transported into the world of the book, we identify with one character, we hate another, we find our own thoughts there, and we are struck by how clearly they are expressed. We cannot like the whole canon, there is no

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trajectory we should follow in order to reach a certain level of reading competence, and there is no shame that already arrived at a certain age (or stage), we have not read a book considered essential. We will either read it when time comes, or we will never get to read it, but what really matters is that books always surprise us. When we read what we like, we let books come to us and we enjoy their company. The complex and gratifying engagement of our bodies in reading indicates an interaction between two bodies: the book's and ours.

3. Finding the right place. The importance of reading posture

When we read, our bodies are engaged in the process through our body's posture. When we read what we like, we choose a comfortable place. It can be an attic room, at a desk, in a tree house, a forest, a beach, a bench, an armchair in front of a bay window or a fireplace, a couch, a cushion, a bright place, or a dark place. Since reading implies an emotional, intellectual, and also a physical intimacy with the book, many of us prefer to read in bed. The book of our choice will make us know what place we need for the reading. However, the bed consecrates our intimacy with the book, and it is also the place that takes us from a state of wakefulness to one of sleep, with the book as a guide in our transition from one state to another. Tucked snugly under the blanket in that intimate space, we let ourselves transported into another world – the world of the book.

In order to allow the mind's power of imagination complete freedom, the body needs to be relaxed, and although we do not travel in the body, the transportation does take place. The intimacy between the reader and the book has to be physically secured before the imagination is unleashed. Alberto Manguel writes about the voluptuous pleasure of reading in bed, and he recalls his habitual childhood experiences:

> What took place, took place in the book, and I was the story's teller. Life happened because I turned the pages. I don't think I can remember a greater *comprehensive* joy than that of coming to the few last pages and setting the book down, so that the end would not take place until at least tomorrow, and sinking back into my pillow with the sense of having actually stopped time (Manguel 1997: 150–151).

As Thomas McLaughlin argues, although reading has been regarded both in literary and cultural theory as 'a disembodied, purely mental act,' it 'is an undeniably bodily act'. In favour of this argument, McLaughlin demonstrates that not only is it physical in the sense that it is haptic; reading is more subtly and deeply physical by being somatic: in other words, it goes beyond touch, impacting body and mind in various degrees of intensity. McLaughlin starts his introduction to his book *Reading and the Body: the Physical Practice of Reading* by noticing what any reader's body does (as we did in the lines above):

> Eyes scan the page, hands hold the book, body postures align entire muscoskeletal frame around the visual and manual requirements of reading, adapting to the materiality of the book and to the physical space the reading body inhabits. Somatic habits develop, integrating reading into the daily life of the body. We read as

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> we eat, as we fall asleep, as we ride the subway, and as we lie on the beach (McLaughlin 2015: 1).

4. Sweet affliction and therapy

So, do we indulge our mind and soul in a pleasure which to some may look selfish and addictive? The more we read, the more reading we need, and the more of it we do the less we seem to care about the surrounding reality. In a Borgesian view, the whole universe is a book, or else a figment of a dreamer's imagination. There is nothing outside of it.

More often than not, reading gives our mental and emotional laziness a jolt. For Emily Dickinson, who was a voracious reader of poetry:

> If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way? (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature* 1985: 2482).

Dickinson was not the only writer to engage her whole body in reading, and who felt its sweet affliction. Manguel quotes Franz Kafka, who wrote to his friend Oskar Pollak in 1904:

> I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn't shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place? So that it can make us happy, as you put it? Good God, we'd be just as happy if we had no books at all; books that make us happy we could, in a pinch, also write ourselves. What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us (Manguel 1997: 93).

The first who said it was Aristotle in his *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE). Aristotle's notion of *catharsis* was derived from the medical term *katharsis*, which in Greek meant 'purgation' and 'purification.' Indulging may sound like a selfish act, a sort of deliberately chosen form of autism, but our soul needs it to cleanse itself of the emotional 'silt' of fear and pity. In other words, literature is therapeutic.

In *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999) Edward Hirsch accounts for the strong effect poetry has on our soul. The account may read as a brilliant example of Aristotle's notion of 'catharsis'. Hirsch remembers that when he was a freshman, his teacher spoke about Achilles's grief caused by the death of his friend Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad*. He recalls that he felt 'something obscure opening inside' him, and that the sense was 'some unassuaged rage of feeling, a frenzied internal sobbing, a delirium of grief' (Hirsch 1999: 81). He felt 'transposed', and he confesses:

> I couldn't follow closely what she was saying because some part of my mind was stuck on the primal image of Achilles smearing his face with dirt and tearing out his hair. I recognized the image from somewhere... (Hirsch 1999: 82).

That 'somewhere' is obviously the deepest reservoir of Hirsch's soul, and the emotional experience was so strong that it also affected him somatically: at eighteen

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the freshman was 'riveted by sorrow, by the anguished poetry of loss,' and he felt he 'was never afterwards the same' (Hirsch 1999: 84). Hirsch quotes Emerson who claimed that 'in every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts' which 'come back to us with a certain alienated majesty' (Hirsch 1999: 84).

5. Letting books dwell in us

When we read a book that enthrals us, the book starts to dwell in us. Harold Bloom argues that the book possesses us as much as we possess it. When we learn a poem by heart, the poem becomes ours, and sometimes it may even become us. Matei Călinescu speaks about a poetics of rereading, especially when a book contains a code devised to evade censors, and Alberto Manguel argues that the process of remembering a book may be a redemptive process.

Manguel likens a book's solidity to a frozen lake which helps you in your crossing, 'and yet at the same time, its only existence is in the mind, as precarious and fleeting as if its letters were written on water' (Manguel 1997: 65). To Edward Hirsch's mind, so shaped by the world's poems of all times, 'many of the greatest poems seem as if they were written in blood' (Hirsch 1999, 156). Using the splendid metaphor of the author's self-effacement, Hirsch argues that

> the poet disappears into the poem, which stands mute, like an idol, until the reader breathes life back into it. And only then does it shimmer again with imaginative presence (Hirsch 1999: 157).

Hirsch is struck by the truth of this while driving across central Iowa. The dreariness of the landscape puts him in a mood to memorize Robert Frost's 'Desert Places,' one of his favourite poems, and when his wife takes out the book and opens it on her lap, he realizes that he knows it by heart. The poem seems to have engraved the scenery onto the windshield, and all he needs to do is to read the lines describing it there. Elated by the idea of it, Hirsch speaks to us, the readers of his own book, and we feel that we are a community:

> I suspect that most committed readers of poetry have experienced this odd pleasure – the shock of recognition – of a poem coming back to you, phrase by phrase, line by line, stanza by stanza. Over the years I returned so often to this lyric, in solitude, that the words had become part of me (Hirsch 1999: 158).

6. The bodies of books

In Hirsch's view, 'writing is 'embodiment' and 'reading is contact' (Hirsch 1999: 29). Arguing that poetry is relation or contact, Hirsch quotes Borges's preface to *Obra poetica*:

> The taste of the apple (states Berkeley) lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit in itself; in a similar way (I would say) poetry lies in the meeting of the poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading (Hirsch 1999: 20).

Borges's remarks add to the sum of the other writers' statements that reading stirs emotions of (an almost) physical nature, i. e. somatic reactions of the kind

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described so vividly by Emily Dickinson and Franz Kafka. Somehow, Borges disparaged the reader's actual physical contact with the printed pages of books. Nonetheless, Umberto Eco alleged that the body of the book – its covers, format, print – has been designed to be a match of our bodies:

> [...] to be held in the hand and to lie beside one in bed, or in the boat, and anywhere where there are no plugs and when any battery is gone! The book which takes scribbling and earmarking, which can be dropped or left open on the chest or on the knee when we fall asleep, the book which fits our pocket, which gets damaged, which is an evidence of the intensity, thoroughness or frequency of our readings, which reminds us – if it looks too new or its pages stick together – that we haven't read it yet (Eco 2008: 45–46)[1].

An addicted bibliophile and book collector, Eco also argued that we know a book we have not read yet because we touched it many times when we dusted it, or when we removed it to look for another book, or when we changed its place on the shelf. Eco is convinced that touching the book several times, some of its content has been transferred to us 'through the fingers, to the brain. So we read the book in a tactile manner, as if it had been written in the Braille alphabet' (Eco 2008: 39–40).

Likewise, if the body of vegetal matter, animal bodies or even human bodies take inscriptions, the bodies of books take their readers' inscriptions in their turn. Books and culture columnist Laura Miller quotes C. S. Lewis's description in a 1932 letter of how he wrote in an already written book by way of 'indexing' it:

> To enjoy a book like that thoroughly I find I have to treat it as a sort of hobby and set about it seriously. I begin by making a map on one of the end-leafs: then I put in a genealogical tree or two. Then I put a running headline at the top of each page: finally I index at the end all the passages I have for any reason underlined. I often wonder – considering how people enjoy themselves developing photos or making scrap-books – why so few people make a hobby of their reading in this way. Many an otherwise dull book which I had to read have I enjoyed in this way, with a fine-nibbed pen in my hand: one is *making* something all the time and a book so read acquires the charm of a toy without losing that of a book[2].

Thus, we return to the book what it gave us: its spiritual presence in our mind and soul, embodied in the passages we highlight, the indexes we draw, the notes we scribble on its margins, the maps we draw on their end-leaves. And so our spiritual, intellectual and emotional interaction with the book takes a material form, which is palimpsestic in a certain sense: the book's writing is not erased to make room for ours, but like in a papyrus in which the underlayer emerges to the surface, the two layers of writing coexist. Surely C. S. Lewis transformed reading into a form of rewriting by leaving the traces and marks of his own reading of the book in the book, and therefore altering its text by superimposing his own reading as writing when he engaged with it in this way. Of course, as C. S. Lewis accounts for it, this kind of interactive reading is both entertaining and rewarding: the reader adds to the body of the book, feeling that 'one is *making* something.'

[1] All quotes from Umberto Eco's book *The Vegetal Memory* are from the Romanian edition. All translations from the book are Dana Bădulescu's.

[2] http://lauramiller.typepad.com/lauramiller/2009/03/how-to-write-in-a-book.html

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7. Reading with the body

Umberto Eco and, more recently, Thomas McLaughlin argued that the bodies of the human species have adapted themselves to reading in the last few thousand years. Looking into the postures of the body and into its complex physical engagement in reading, Eco stated:

> The eye reads and the whole body takes action. Reading also means finding an appropriate posture, it is an act that has to do with the neck, the spine, the buttocks. And the shape of the book, which has been studied for centuries, until the most ergonomically suitable format was achieved, is the shape this object must have in order for it to be handled and taken to a right distance for the eyes. Reading is closely connected to our physiology (Eco 2007: 25).

In an approach where he purports to explode the mind/body binary, which often dismisses the role of the body in reading, McLaughlin dwells on reading as a primarily physical activity. Indeed, in McLaughlin's view, reading is no more and no less than an achievement of the body:

> Reading *does* demand the work of consciousness and cognition, emotion and spirit, as literary theory has assumed, but all these attributes of mind are achievements of the body, produced by interaction of the body and the world, including the textual world. Bodies read. Nerves, muscles, hands, brains – flesh and blood adapted precisely to the task of reading; in and through the task connecting to language, society, culture, history; in and through that connection producing mind, consciousness, textual experience. Reading is a physical practice that requires a vast social pedagogy (McLaughlin 2015: 2).

Indeed, in our everyday parlance we speak about 'devouring' or, less commonly but very expressively, 'inhaling' books, thus referencing very old cultural practices of a bodily assimilation of the bodies of books into our own bodies.

8. The threat/ A new way of doing and thinking reading

Reading needs concentration, it actively occupies the brain, it consumes energy and effort to decipher the text, to make links, to remember characters, to fulfil missing details. It involves the eyes, sometimes even the tongue, which mimics incipient movements of pronunciation, and the hands to turn pages. The development of a plot that takes ten pages of text necessitates more than twenty minutes to read, while watching it in a movie, for instance, may take only a few minutes. In addition, when we are more or less passive watchers our imagination rests, we do not need to force the transformation of words into images, because the images tell everything with arguably less effort on our part. Because the appetite for reading is not easy to pass on, it needs continuous and progressive approaches until the magic works. To attain the pleasure of reading, to develop that special 'vascularisation,' one needs training and perseverance. In contrast, electronic gadgets and the figurative world they contain are self-explainable, reachable with much less effort. That will inevitably produce mutations in our species.

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McLaughlin contends that in today's digital culture, the users of various digital devices literally transcend their bodies and, to the limit, one may say that they are disembodied. Indeed, the space into which digital users are immersed, be it computer desktop, laptop, tablet, e-reader or mobile phone, is virtual, i.e. not physical. For better or for worse, this 'marriage' between reader and texts on screens is consumed in a space where no body enters. Since body and mind are not separable, then how can a disembodied mind work?

In her book *Digital Sociology*, Deborah Lupton uses 'meat' as a metaphor encapsulating the sheer physical nature of the digital user's body, which is 'distilled in a clean, pure, uncontaminated relationship with computer technology' (Lupton 2014: 479). The meat's replacement is the avatar, i.e. a simulation.

However, when it comes to the process of reading, acts like touching the arrow keys on the keyboard to move the cursor around in the digital text involve the reader in some form of embodiment, which is very different from reading print. Words printed on paper do not 'feel' the same as the layout of pixels on the screen, and leafing or turning pages of codex do not 'feel' the same as scrolling. Eyes must process pixel layout differently, and fingers and hands are engaged in the task of reading differently.

What is the digital reader's posture, and how does it impact the reading process? To Andrew Piper's mind, the reader's posture and haptic perceptions in the digital media formats lead not just to a different relationship to reading but also to a new way of thinking reading:

> […] the kinetic activities of swooping instead of turning, the postural differences of sitting back versus up, tilting our heads down or forward, grasping with our heads down or resting our hands on, the shape of the folded sheets versus the roamable, zoomable or clickable surfaces of the electronic screen – all of these features (and many more) contribute to a different relationship to reading, and thus thinking (Piper 2013: X).

In McLaughlin's terms, while reading print is intensive and concentrated, reading texts in the digital media is hyperextensive, i.e. more flexible and prone to distraction, which is not external but it belongs to the system. Both Eco and Piper speak about the bodies of the books, which, like the human body that has adjusted to reading on paper for centuries now, have a spine, they are 'vertebral,' while digital texts are 'invertebrate' (Piper 2013: 2). McLaughlin, and before him Eco, speak about the readers' attachment to the bodies of books by surrounding themselves by books, touching and caressing their bodies lined up on the shelves, piled up on the desk, lying on the floor or idling on the bedside table. Readers of digital texts cannot experience this kind of physical and emotional attachment.

In "Hypertext Fiction Reading: Haptics and Immersion", Anne Mangen speaks about the reader's phenomenal intimacy with the codex; by contrast, digital devices demand the users' attention to themselves, and not to the text, which in the virtual space is not a bodily presence. The kind of immersion digital readers experience is 'technological' and not 'phenomenological' (Mangen 2008: 406). Mangen's argument is that technological immersion engages us in operating the device and not in reading the text. In other words, our physical, 'phenomenological' engagement with the book on paper is a guarantee of our in-depth engagement with

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the text; our emotional response to the text depends upon the bodily presence of the book.

9. Reading in the New Media Age

It is true that not everybody was keen on reading before the New Media Age and, however the world moved on, we apparently made progress, and the society is perceived as evolving. Nonetheless, at least some of us had the virus, and those who had it would walk past the others with some sort of flashing light gleaming above their heads, which was visible, or so some of us thought it was, to the rest of us, while they were speaking, gesturing, behaving in certain ways. They impacted us in a subliminal way, making us more human, warmer, with more respect towards others. The 'illuminated' readers were like beaming little stars among us, though none of these people would cry their joy in the town square.

We should perpetuate the pleasure of reading in today's society. We believe the issue is so important that it needs concentrated efforts to find the right solutions. To do that, a special chapter dedicated to forming the reading habits in young people should be part of the syllabus. This is different from teaching literature in schools. Kindling the pleasure of reading does not mean learning about our poets and writers in the manner we learn history or geography. Its goal should be forming in youngsters those special 'vascularisations' we mentioned above, the very essence of learning how to find joy and happiness rooted in books. That may be a very difficult task to teach. However, it is a task to be taken seriously by educators.

Another solution worth trying would be to develop apps (applications that can be activated on mobiles), specially designed to stir in youngsters the pleasure of reading.

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Abstract

This essay starts from the proviso that the best writers are also the most passionate readers, thus engaging their readers' minds, souls and bodies in the most complex and compelling ways. In many cases, they do so through their characters, which become the

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embodiments and prototypes of our own reading selves. In *The Vegetal Memory*, Umberto Eco argued that 'the rhythm of reading follows that of the body, the rhythm of the body follows that of reading. We read not only with the brain, we read with our whole body and that is why, when we read a book, we cry or we laugh or, when we read thrillers, they make our hair stand on end' (Eco 2008: 26). Emily Dickinson's unsettling account that 'If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry' (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature* 1985: 2482)[3] may serve as a reinforcement of the essentially somatic nature of our engagement in reading. We will speak about the experiences of reading codex as narrated or described by writers and common readers, be those our own or described by others, and we will argue that those are ultimately physical.

[3] Translated by Dana Bădulescu.

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