ON BOOKS AND READING

Dana BĂDULESCU
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: This article looks into the evolution of books and paradigms of reading in the last approximately three hundred years. The proviso is that print compelled the people to read, and therefore to be modern. Since a large number of books entered the world, the extensive model of reading took precedence over the intensive model. Referencing a variety of ideas on books and reading, I argue that there is a bodily interaction between readers and books, and also between the act of reading and the printed text. Moreover, books have a body of their own, which has been designed to be a match for the human body. Probing into possible answers to the question "Why do we read?", I also tackled the resistance of some texts, which may either frustrate their readers, or give them a sense of what Bloom calls the "reader's sublime." The difficulty of reading puts the reader not just in the text, but in its very centre, while the text itself becomes the reader's drama. In the 21st century, in the context of what many consider to be a "decline of literacy" and the large use of electronic reading devices, books and reading have entered a new stage. The printed book and reading traditional books have not lost their grip, while the e-book and e-reading need further testing.

„...se poate spune că omul modern intră pe scena istoriei ca un cititor."
Matei Călinescu, *A citi, a reciti. Către o poetică a re(lecturii)*

„Trăim într-o epocă în care mesajul cărţilor a devenit atât de slab audibil, încât singura sarcină a celor care încă mai scriu este aceea de a repeta ceea ce alţii au spus înaintea noastră mai bine."
H.-R. Patapievici, *Omul recent. O critică a modernităţii din perspectiva întrebării „Ce se pierde atunci când ceva se câştigă?"*

Reading is being modern

When Matei Călinescu stated that "the modern individual entered the stage of history as a reader" (Călinescu 2003:92), he supported his argument on the idea that, starting with Gutenberg's cutting-edge invention of print in the 15th century, followed by its fast spread and wide circulation of printed books during the Protestant Reform of the 16th century and in its wake, the moderns developed a new sense of responsibility for and also a certain sense of freedom in the unmediated and personal interpretation of the Book of Books. Quoting François Furet's and Jacques Ozouf's *Reading and Writing*, Călinescu further argues that the relation between each individual and God stopped being taken for granted or understood in a passive manner, and it became one of citizenship which could be accessed through reading. Thus, as Furet and Ozouf claimed, Luther turned what Gutenberg made possible into a necessity: putting the Scripture in the very centre of Christian eschatology, the Reform

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

transformed a technical invention into a spiritual duty. (Furet and Ozouf qtd. by Călinescu 2003:93)

Călinescu's contention sheds light on a crucial shift of paradigm from a sense of transcendence achieved through the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, which in its turn authorised a handful of clergy to interpret the Bible for the people in the Middle Ages, to a sense of transcendence achieved through an unmediated relation between the Text and its readers in an age which marked the onset of modernity. This paradigm shift entailed not only an approach to reading as a spiritual duty, but also an awareness that reading is an activity that allows freedom and creativity on the reader's part.

Two models of reading

Călinescu refers us to a distinction made by recent historians of reading between *intensive* reading, which is a characteristic of the traditional approach, and *extensive* reading, which is the modern approach. (Călinescu 2003:97) Intensive reading was a practice of the Protestant communities from approximately the 16th to the late 18th century, when educated people would read a small number of books (mainly the Bible and other religious works) in order to do frequent inspections of their souls in search for signs of redemption.

If intensive reading was still dicated by religious necessities and therefore was done according to the religious calendar, extensive reading may be regarded as a genuine revolution of an age of secularization, which was quintessentially modern. At the turn of the 18th century, readers were currently exposed to a large number of books, most of them of a secular nature, and, as Călinescu argues, a lot of them also escapist, which they would read in an order decided by themselves with no connection to the religious calendar. This new paradigm entailed a new attitude to reading itself: since the readers' approach was no longer marked by religious reverence, it became nonchalant and at the same time superficial, similar to the consumption of any other goods. As Călinescu points out, reading started to be hasty, dicated by the need to satisfy a more or less frivolous curiosity. (Călinescu 2003:98)

Even if extensive reading is a modern model, the moderns themselves threw it into question. Rousseau condemned cursory reading as vicious in his own novel *La nouvelle Héloïse*. The rising popularity of the novel as a genre related to consummerism has attracted the stings of many writers and scholars in the last three centuries. In his book *How to Read and Why* Harold Bloom evokes the advice given by Sir Francis Bacon:

Read not to contradict or confute, nor to believe or take for granted, nor to find comfort and discourse, but to weigh and consider. (Sir Francis Bacon qtd. by Bloom 2000: 21)

Quoting Dr. Samuel Johnson, who in Bloom's opinion is the ideal reader of all times, the American critic states that "to read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you." (Bloom 2000:28) Basing his own arguments on Emerson's and Johnson's approaches to reading, Bloom also lets himself seduced by Virginia Woolf's praising judgements of William Hazlitt, whom she considered "one of those rare critics who have thought so much that they can dispense with reading." (Virginia Woolf qtd. by Bloom 2000:20) When he endorses Woolf's (and also Emerson's) idea that a reader who truly deserves the name is someone who goes beyond the book, Bloom meets Andrei Pleşu's remark that:

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

Being an ”intellectual” does not strictly mean that one has to hold a book in one’s hands day in day out. Intellectuals are defined especially by what they do when they do *not* read: when they reflect, when they talk, when they keep silent, when they laugh, when they pray. (Pleşu 2011:234)[1]

Pleşu makes this remark in the context of what he calls ”the quality of reading”, and what he means is very close to the intensive model. Bloom calls it ”deep reading”, and his urge is a reformulation and revisitation of Emerson’s advice:

Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to lerarn to share in that one nature that writes and reads.” (Bloom 2000:29)

Reading with the body and the bodies of books

The best writers are also passionate readers. It was because he was raised in the spirit of respect for books that Rushdie started to love them and eventually to write them. In his essay ”Is Nothing Sacred?” he recalls:

Devout households in India often contained, and still contain, persons in the habit of kissing holy books. But we kissed everything. We kissed dictionaries and atlases. We kissed Enid Blyton novels and Superman comics. If I’d ever dropped the telephone directory I’d probably have kissed that, too. (Rushdie 1991:415)

Rushdie’s cherished memory of kissing books speaks volumes about an almost eroticised relationship between a reader and his books, wich involves a loving bodily contact. Even before learning how to read, the child learned how to love books.

A writer and also a collector of books, Umberto Eco dedicated a whole book to what he calls the books’ ”vegetal memory because if parchment was made from animal skin, papyrus was vegetal, and when paper started to be widely used (as early as the 12th century) they started to make books from flax, hemp and linen paper.” So related are books to vegetal materials that, as Eco points out, ”both the etymology of *biblos* and that of *liber* send to the bark of a tree.” (Eco 2007:14-15)[2]

Eco’s *The Vegetal Memory* is a book about the function of books as memory keepers, but also about the indelibly physical symbiosis between humans and books. Starting from a memorable scene in Joyce’s *Ulysses* in which Leopold Bloom reads while defecating, Eco remarks 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 2007:26)

In his approach to literary reading informed by a neurocgnitive poetics model, Arthur Jacobs tackles the question one poses when thinking that words, which are artificial stimuli, can stir emotions that may range from mild to excessively violent. The most dramatic example of how poetry can be felt, in Bloom’s words, ”with all of you”, is Emily Dickinson’s unsettling account:

[1] All quotes from Pleşu’s book *Despre frumuseţea uitată a vieţii / Of Life’s Forgotten Beauties* are my translation

[2] All quotes from Eco’s book *Memoria vegetală şi alte scrieri de bibliofilie* are my translation

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

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 way I know it. Is there any other way. (Dickinson 1985:2482)

All her letters to Higgisnon show that Emily read poetry as intensely as she wrote it. For her, words, these artificial stimuli, were as strong, or even stronger than ”natural” everyday life events. As a matter of fact, words in their most intense and aesthetically effective manifestation were literally her life. In another letter she inquired whether her ”Verse” was ”alive” and whether ”it breathed.” (Dickinson 1985:2477)

Jacobs argues that Bühler's *Sprachtheorie* (1934) anticipates later approaches to ”the *Sphärengeruch* (spheric fragrance) of words, according to which words have a substance, and the actions they serve – speaking, reading, thinking, feeling – are themselves substance-controlled.” (Jacobs 2015:137) Jacobs references Bühler's example of ”the word *Radieschen* (garden radish) which can invoke red and/or white color impressions, crackling sounds, or earthly smells and spicy tastes in the minds of the readers and ”transport” them either into a garden or to a dinner table which create an entirely different ”sphere” as, say, the ocean.” (Jacobs 2015:137)

Writers of all genres, and maybe most emblematically the modernists, who designedly blurred not only genre boundaries, but also those between life and art, glossed on the synethtetic effects of not merely the words on the page, but more often than not the phonic effect of sounds, which, as Bühler (referenced by Jacobs) argued, invoke colour impressions, i.e. correlations the readers' minds make with the natural world. In his poem *Voyelles* Rimbaud experimented with the correlations between vowels, on the one hand, and colours, natural elements and the most delicate physical traits of the beloved, on the other. Charles Baudelaire wove ”commingled perfumes, sounds, and hues” into his poem *Correspondences*, where he projected the individual as a *flâneur* through ”forest-groves of symbols, strange and solemn, / Who follow him with their familiar glances.” (http://fleursdumal.org/poem/103)

Experimental prose writers of the early decades of the 20th century Virginia Woolf and James Joyce pushed language beyond its limits, contemplating large scale visual and musical effects, carefully considering their impact upon readers. Woolf designed a whole novel by employing an obviously artificial, i. e. crafted rhythm meant to evoke in the reader's mind the rhythm of the waves:

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly erased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the great cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually. (Woolf 2007:639)

What Woolf strove to achieve in *The Waves*, while being aware of the extreme difficulty of the task, was precisely to give her readers the impression of the ”spheric fragrance of words.” The difficulty which she recorded in her diary was that the impression had to be of natural freshness there where her medium was that of artificial stimuli, i.e. words. She rose to the task by writing a prose that feels not only fragrantly fresh, but also poetic, musical and pictorial. Actually, her word combinations have more than ”spheric fragrance” – they also have a strong rhythmic and visual feel. It most certainly helped that in the process of

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

writing, Woolf worked on *The Waves* while listening to ”late sonatas.” So immersed was she in the atmosphere she artificially created that she recorded in her diary that ”the windows fidget at their fastenings as if we were at sea.” (http://www.uah.edu/woolf/wavesdiary.html)

To that, Woolf added the polyphonic technique of soliloques, thus achieving in the novel something similar to a play-poem. The descriptions of the garden and the house by the sea, imbued as they are with the rhythm of the waves, have qualities that remind readers of Cézanne’s still lifes. Woolf’s reflections on the effects she wanted to achieve in her writing show that she wanted her readers to have the full experience of the ”spheric fragrance” of words, which for her were of a material and visual nature that she desolidified in her writing:

If I were a painter I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent...curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. (Woolf qtd. by Dowling 1985:103)

Despite the debates in which Joyce scholars have been engaged in order to extricate themselves from the dilemma whether Joyce succeeded or not in translating a musical form into prose in the ”Sirens” chapter of *Ulysses*, there are numerous passages in the whole novel (and other writings) where the writer self-consciously created effects that brought his prose close not just to music, but also to painting. In their ”spheric fragrance”, Joyce’s words can smell (as in ”Calypso”, while Bloom is cooking breakfast), they can feel to the touch, they can ring in our ears, or their colours can be seen as in the ”Proteus” chapter, when Stephen unfolds his thoughts on the ”ineluctable modality of the visible”, contemplating ”signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot.” (Joyce 1946:38)

Closer to our times, and shaped by two languages, Herta Müller glosses on words in German and words in Romanian, comparing their gaps and their richness, brooding about their dialectal varieties or their effects in writing. In her essay ”There’s a different pair of eyes in each language” comprised in *The King Bows and Kills* she compares the phrase ”*Der Wind* geht” (the wind *goes*) in the dialect of her village with the phrase ”*Der Wind* weht” (the wind *blows*) in the literary German that she learned at school, and she remembers that when she was seven years old that sounded as if the wind inflicted some pain on itself. The distinction is somehow bridged over by the word in the Romanian phrase (vântul *bate*), which is the same as in literary German, and she recollects that when one said ”blows”, you could immediately hear the noise of movement. (Müller 2005:25) In this essay Müller subtly goes beyond what the two languages and their varieties can express, and writes about the failure of words in either language to express one’s innermost recesses, or even about the collapse of words. It is here that she also speaks about the quality of a text to stir a silent rush in her head. (Müller 2005:20) She quotes Bruno Ganz who argued in an interview that poetry lies in a vast space, wrapped in air, and it always says more, and sets more things in motion than words themselves can say. (Müller 2005:21) What Müller reinforces here is the importance of the lacunae, silences and gaps in languages and in texts, which are there in the books we read, reminding us that there may be even more to language than the ”spheric fragrance” of words, which intrigues us, frustrates us, but ultimately compels us.

Eco accounts for reading as a tactile experience in which bodies suggest ideas, and the sensation of our fingers touching the book stirs deep emotions in us. The ”infamous” page in

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

Joyce's book evoked by Eco is echoed, hundreds of pages later, in "Nausicaa", and then again, much later, in "Penelope", where Molly toys with the thought of gathering Bloom's shocking ideas related to her body into a book.

Joyce was not the only modernist writer to focus on the human body in the body of the book. So keen was D. H. Lawrence on the essentially corporeal nature of his writing that he wrote pages that feel with an electrifying tactile intensity as they read. After experimenting with the visual in *Sons and Lovers* and probably feeling that he exhausted its possibilities there, Lawrence made his most daring experiment with the tactile effect of writing in *Women in Love*. After a chapeter when he "lectures" to a group of naked men on the "pure culture in sensation" (Lawrence 1998:80) underpinning an African carved figure of a woman in labour, Birkin takes off his clothes to feel the chilling vigour of luxurious vegetation in the wake of a scene of domestic violence. What Lawrence does in those pages of the "Breadalby" chapter is to let the vegetal memory of the book contain the bliss of his character's immersion in the purifying vegetal world:

He took off his clothes, and set down naked among the primroses, moving his feet softly among the primroses, his legs, his knees, his arms up to the armpits, lying down and letting them touch his belly, his breasts. It was such a fine, cool, subtle touch all over him, he seemed to saturate himself with their contact. (Lawrence 1998:110)

Lawrence's approach to human physiology differs from Joyce's. While Joyce subdued physiology, containing it cerebrally, Lawrence treated it as an underlying cosmic force, his visions were animistic and the clashes between human nature and Western culture fierce. Where Joyce let the bodies of his characters speak with unprecedented boldness out of a long cultural heritage, Lawrence shook his characetrs' bodies off any sense of cultural heritage, making them leap dangerously into dark realms where they would feel "this coolness and subtlety of vegetation travelling into one's blood." (Lawrence 1998:110) Both had a very fine ear for the choreography engaging the bodies of their characters and the rhythm of their prose, but Joyce's was tempered by an artist who eventually chilled the lava of emotion, while the lava of Lawrence's characters burst out.

In *The Vegetal Memory* Eco argues that the book has been designed to be a match for the human body:

...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 2007:45-46)

Books have their bodies, too, but Gabriel Liiceanu argues that a book's body is "the only *spiritual body* there is." (Liiceanu 2001:169) Tolstoy's ball scene in *War and Peace*, when Prince Bolkonsky invites Natasha to dance, inspired Liiceanu to take it as a metaphor of our making first contact with books: as women stand in a line waiting to be invited, books stand on the shelves waiting to be picked up and for the dance to begin. Picking them up may be pure chance. Writing about that moment, when the hand reaches out for a hitherto neglected book, Umberto Eco claims that as we start reading it we realize that we already

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

know what is written there. What accounts for this rather strange phenomenon, to Eco's mind, is 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 2007:39-40) We know the book 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.

Why do we read?

We read for various reasons, either extrinsic (because we need to take an exam, or because we teach what we read) or intrinsic (because we like to be transported, to explore different universes, to have our imagination challenged, or to be amused). However, unlike the air we breathe and the food we eat in order to keep ourselves alive, reading is not dictated by our instincts. Nor is it an absolutely vital activity. While breathing, eating, sleeping are instinctual activities, reading is an acquired skill which defines us as cultural beings, or, as both Andrei Pleşu and Gabriel Liiceanu argue, as "a species of the *interval*" because

...we are neither under the power of the instinct, which sorts everything out with the simplicity of nature, nor under the umbrella of the sacred, which also sorts things out easily, with the simplicity of grace. Humanity is in an intermediate state, it is in limbo. It has broken with instinct and it is not yet in the sphere of sanctity. (Pleşu 1994:107)

Pleşu contends that because of this predicament nothing represents us better than culture does. He emphatically states that:

Culture is the most appropriate modality of subsisting in the interval condition; it is the best way of waiting for a solution you don't have at the moment. (Pleşu 1994:107-108)

Liiceanu shares Pleşu's idea, and adds what he calls, referencing Constantin Noica, "*the hygienic motivation* – for not only the body, but the spirit also can be "unclean", reading is a means of keeping yourself spiritually clean." Therefore, "the book is a central element in the hygiene of the mind." (Liiceanu 2001:171) According to Liiceanu, another reason why we read is because we want to shorten distances. Quoting Noica again, the Romanian writer states that "the book is a means of speaking with your closest other", and quoting Jean Paul, he endorses the idea that "books are more substantial letters written to friends." (Liiceanu 2001:171) Thus, reading brings us closer to the Other, annihilating both temporal and spatial distances. Here Liiceanu meets Edward Hirsch, whose book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* is centered on the metaphor of the "message in a bottle", which he took from Paul Celan:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense, too, are under way: they are making toward something. (Hirsch 1999:1)

Reading is dialogue, and books are the vehicle of dialogue. Dwelling on this function of dialogue and communication, which Liiceanu calls even "telecommunication" (to lay stress on the distance component), Hirsch illustrates it with Whitman's poem "To You":

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me,
Why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you? (Hirsch 1999:3)

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

Commenting on this extraordinary function that reading performs, of which Whitman was aware some one hundred and forty years before, Hirsch enthusiastically embraces the message of Whitman's poem that

Strangers who communicate might well become friends. Whitman refuses to be bound, to be circumscribed, by any hierarchical or class distinctions. One notices how naturally he addresses the poem not to the people around him, whom he already knows, but to the stranger, to the future reader, to you and me, to each of us who would pause with him in the open air. Let there be an easy flow – an affectionate commerce – between us. (Hirsch 1999:3-4)

In *The Vegetal Memory* Eco also sees reading as dialogue, and virtually all the writers of all ages and cultures have been aware of this function. E. M. Forster urged us to open books and let authors speak to us. In one of his diary entries he wrote about having come across Whitman's poem "A Passage to India" and letting Whitman speak to him. The result was that he titled his own book *A Passage to India* without changing a single word of the poem's title. Writing itself is oftentimes a form of re-writing as reading when it is intertextual, as Forster's novel is.

When he tackled character in *Aspects of the Novel* Forster wrote about another reason why we read:

In daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists. We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve people well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. And this is why they often seem more definite than characters in history, or even our own friends; we have been told all about them that can be told; even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe. (Forster 1990:56-57)

That is a truth which may account for the empathy we develop especially when we read books. We are able to empathise, which is essentially an ability to identify with the other, because we understand them fully. While that is never achieved in real life, as Forster so aptly argues, it is made possible in literature.

It is not just that by reading we get to know "people", in fact human nature, better, but reading can also make us change ourselves by degrees, in our own way. In her study "The Cognitive Science of Fiction" Keith Oatley based her arguments on an experiment and found that subjects reading Chekhov "changed their personality by small amounts" and that "the effect was mediated by emotions experienced during reading." (Oatley 2012:428) Oatley also reports that "changes of personality occurred particularly in those traits – agreebleness and openness – that are less subject to developmental change in young adulthood." (Oatley 2012:428)

Both Eco and Bloom argue that reading has a compensatory function and it enhances life. Bloom states:

We read not only because we cannot know enough people, but because friendship is so vulnerable, so likely to disappear, overcome by space, time, imperfect sympathies, and all the sorrows of familial and passional life. (Bloom 2000:19)

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

Eco compares the rich life of somebody who is in the habit of reading with the scanty life of an illiterate person or of somebody who will not read. While the latter live their lives only, the reader lives numerous lives. Likewise, Oatley calls it ”fiction as simulation” and shows that ”in verbal art, words act as cues that address mental models that can be constructed into imagined scenes that we can then experience for ourselves.” (Oatley 2012:426) This may mean that when we read we enhance our experience, but we also explore ourselves, which is a function of reading also acknowledged by Călinescu in his *Rereading*.

Ultimately, in Bloom’s words, ”we read, frequently if unknowingly, in quest of a mind more original than our own.” (Bloom 2000:25)

The anxiety of reading and the reader’s sublime; ”the reader in the text”

The inconvenience of finding ”a mind more original than our own” may be that our own mind may be shocked, baffled and frustrated by that originality.When Schlovsky introduced the concept of ”defamiliarisation”, he meant that writers designedly use artistic techniques of presenting to readers usual things in unfamiliar ways in order to enhance their perception of the familiar.

In Forster’s terms, fantasy or ”the fantastic turn” is defamiliarising, and it employs ”the introduction of a god, ghost, angel, monkey, monster, midget, witch into ordinary life; or the introduction of ordinary men into no-man’s land, the future, the past, the interior of the earth, the fourth dimension; or divings into and dividings of personality; or finally the device of parody or adaptation.” (Forster 1990:106) Forster’s examples include novels spanning 160 years of literature in English from *Tristram Shandy* to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which is obviously ”far more than a fantasy” (Forster 1990:113) , as Forster admits. What makes it a fantasy is that ”Heaven and earth fill with infernal life, personalities melt, sexes interchange, until the whole universe, including poor, pleasure-loving Mr Bloom, is involved in one joyless orgy.” (Forster 1990:114)

Texts which baffle the mind also sharpen its ”simulating” capacities in Oatley’s terms. What chances are there in real life that our nose should leave our face and develop a life of its own, as in Gogol’s short story, or that we should turn into a bug like Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s novella? How are we to make sense of the split personality of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? If the events in *The Turn of the Screw* are the fabrication of an abnormally imaginative mind, where is the reader’s foothold? How are we to extricate the puzzle of Henry James’s ”The Figure in the Carpet”? What did Emily Dickinson mean by ”I Felt a Funeral in My Brain”? How are we to deal with the self-fabricating character of Sarah Woodruff and the three different endings in Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*? All these are deliberately ciphered texts, and reading them we may reach what Bloom called the ”reader’s Sublime” (Bloom 2000:29), which is by no means a comfortable state.

Especially when we deal with extremely difficult ciphered texts we are what Matei Călinescu calls ”the inscribed reader”, or, referencing the anthology edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, ”the reader in the text.” Călinescu argues that readers can become characters as such, and reading itself may become the pretext of a ”fictional drama”, which is a ”meta-reading. ” (Călinescu 2003:130)

(E)-Reading in the 21st century

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

Eco is optimistic. When he tackles the idea that our age is called the *Decline of Literacy*, he rather doubts it is quite so. He cannot believe that the new media will kill printed books, and he thinks that those who decry the decline of literacy will be considered pathetic some day.

Eco rests his optimism with regards to the survival of printed books on the fact that a few thousand years have passed since the species adapted themselves to reading:

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 their study ”When Meaning matters, look but don’t touch: The effects of posture on reading” Christopher C. Davoli, Feng Du, Juan Montana, Susan Garverick and Richard A. Abrams found that semantic processing is impoverishd near the hands, but cognitive control is enhanced near the hands. They also admit that more and more electronic reading is done near the hands with the use of mobile handheld devices, which would eliminate worries in that respect. However, at least two questions are as yet unanswered: to what extent can we adapt our capacities of reading longer texts to reading via electronic devices? What is the importance of hand proximity on reading via hard copy?

The paradox of our time is that while literacy seems to be in decline, there is an inflation of books. Pleşu argues that ”the profusion of books necessarily causes a crises of criteria. It becomes more and more difficult to choose, to find your way: you either become a greedy mindless consumer, or the outmoded shadow of your own idiosyncrasies.” (Pleşu 2011:230)

Nevertheless, Pleşu is just an observer of the inflation of books in a book which essentially performs the vital function to which Eco dedicates his own book *The Vegetal Memory*. Pleşu’s book was written to remind us of many things of beauty which are still in the world, but have been forgotten or neglected. In *The Vegetal Memory* Eco approves of the internet, of CD-s and of e-books, which can store a precious cultural heritage. However, as a book collector, he wonders whether he could love them as he loves the paper rustling in his hands.

Coda: How it feels to be an e-book

In *The Vegetal Memory* Eco figures out ”The Interior Monologue of an E-book.” The e-book deems that it was born ”empty”, and then it feels filled out. Unlike traditional printed books, which ”live” just one text all their life, and whose ”memory” is physically limited to one thousand pages, the e-book can store very many texts at once. The pages of an e-book unfold on a screen, while it ”makes sense” of what it is not only from the text it stores, but also from its circuits.

The e-book feels it can leave that text and think to itself that it stores a text, which probably a printed book will not be able to do. However, the newly born e-book starts to feel strange when it is switched off and it cannot live in the text it carries within. Oddly enough, there is a memory zone that stays awake, and the e-book knows what it is, and it knows it carries a text within, although it cannot access it.

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

Suddenly, the e-book feels switched on again, but this time it is inhabited by another text, which is a thrilling experience, although it somehow pines for the text it stored before. That is followed by a perplexing experience of being filled with several texts at once, without being allowed to get used to the user's whimsical shifts. The e-book feels overwhelmed and "split":

...having several lives and several souls is like having no life and no soul; moreover, I need to be cautious and avoid falling for a particular text, for tomorrow my user might delete it. (Eco 2007:181)

The e-book wishes it were a printed book storing just one story and inhabiting a peaceful universe, where the distinction between good and evil should be clear-cut.

Of course, Eco included this fable in his collection of essays on books half-playfully. After all, he is a bibliophile, and by definition that implies fondness of printed books. In the context of Eco's book, whose governing idea is that traditional books on paper preserve what he calls the "vegetal memory" of humankind, this interior monologue of an e-book is there to reinforce the overwhelming value and importance of the pedigree.

Bibliography

1. Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*, Scribner, New York, 2000. Print.
2. Călinescu, Matei. *A citi, a reciti. Către o poetică a (re)lecturii*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2003. Print.
3. Davoli, Christopher C., Du, Feng, Montana, Juan, Garverick, Susan and Abrams, Richard A. "When meaning matters, look but don't touch: the effects of posture on reading", in *Memory and Cognition*, 2010, 38 (5), pp. 555-562. Web.
4. Eco, Umberto. *Memoria vegetală şi alte scrieri de bibliofilie*, RAO, 2007. Print.
5. Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*, Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
6. Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, Harvest Books, New York, 1999. Print.
7. Jacobs. Arthur. "Towards a neurocognitive poetics model of literary reading", pp. 135-159 in *Cognitive Neuroscience of Natural Language Use*, Cambridge University Press, 2015. Web.
8. Joyce, James. *Ulysses*, Random House, New York, 1946. Print.
9. Lawrence, D. H. *Women in Love*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998. Print.
10. Liiceanu, Gabriel. *Declaraţie de iubire*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2001. Print.
11. Müller, Herta. *Regele se-nclină şi ucide*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2005. Print.
12. Oatley, Keith. "The Cognitive Science of Fiction", in *Cognitive Science*, 2012, Vol 3, Issue 4, pp. 425-430. Web.
13. Patapievici, H.-R. *Omul recent. O critică a modernităţii din perspectiva întrebării „Ce se pierde atunci când ceva se câştigă?"*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2001. Print.
14. Pleşu, Andrei. *Minima moralia*, Humanitas, 1994. Print.
15. Pleşu Andrei. *Despre frumuseţea uitată a vieţii*, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2011. Print.
16. Rushdie Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books, 1991. Print.
17. Woolf, Virginia. *The Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*, Wordsworth Library Collection, 2007. Print.

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)

18. ***The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Second Edition, Volume 1, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1985. Print.
19. http://www.uah.edu/woolf/wavesdiary.html

BDD-A22236 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:11:47 UTC)