

New Studies in the History of Reading

Eli MacLaren

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NEW STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF READING¹

Eli MACLAREN
McGill University

Reading is an act of appropriation. To read is to grasp—to encounter some external object and to incorporate it. Buying books is the pleasure that it is precisely because laying one’s hands on a text and placing it among one’s possessions crudely mimics the deeper acquisition that will be effected upon reading it: through reading, we enlarge our estate. Others need not be deprived by this possession, although our laying claim to a text may excite envy, as a pair of young brothers or a pair of old critics will readily demonstrate with a certain comic book or film. Moreover, every such instance of appropriation of course changes us, consisting as it does of bringing the self into contact with something that was foreign to it before but will never be so again, while obscuring or displacing some prior part of our character.

This metaphor of reading as a process of appropriation is only one of several that commonly define our concept of the act. It may be distinguished from others, such the metaphor of reading as reception—a more passive process ranging from positive connotations (being taught or influenced) to negative (being controlled or corrupted). The metaphor of reading as travel is another that might be cited as basic, if paradoxical: the idea of “being transported,” of moving motionlessly into other “realms,” captures our opposite desires simultaneously to see new sights and to be at home. It is a more neutral trope, leaving indeterminate the question of whether one is changing or staying the same. To formulate reading as an act of claiming, an act of making something one’s own, is thus to choose from

among several alternatives the model that emphasizes most the freedom of the reader, and it is a political choice, for it asserts the reader's power.

Two twentieth-century examples will suggest that this model has substance. Marcel Proust captured the chemistry of reading, its transformative combination of self and other, in his celebrated essay, "Sur la lecture." The essay reflects his reading of John Ruskin and appeared as the preface to his 1906 translation of the latter's *Sesame and Lilies*. In it he takes Ruskin to task for his use of the old trope of reading as an exalted "conversation" with the best minds of the past; instead, Proust immerses us into the bracing loneliness of his own reading experience. He likens reading to the childhood experience of mounting the stairs in his grandfather's house in the stillness after lunch, and entering a bedroom filled with antique objects which he was for the most part forbidden or unable to use. He likens it to setting foot in a dreary, cold hotel across the square from the train station in a provincial town. Reading is this pleasure—feeling one's imagination "plunged into the depths of the non-ego." It is "that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude":

I have tried to show in the notes accompanying this book that reading could not be thus made comparable to a conversation, were it with the wisest of men; that the essential difference between a book and a friend is not their degree of greatness of wisdom, but the manner in which we communicate with them—reading, contrary to conversation, consisting for each of us in receiving the communication of another thought, while we remain alone, that is to say, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power we have in solitude, which conversation dissipates immediately; while continuing to be inspired, to maintain the mind's full, fruitful work on itself.²

Only in solitude does the self completely let down its guard; only in reading do we open ourselves to being influenced by another while retaining the full power of private self-determination. Reading is this unique opportunity to mingle in a sovereign manner what we are with what we are not.

A similar idea occurs in the work of the Canadian poet, Elaine M. Catley. In "Fall in the Foothills—A Phantasy," from her 1927 chapbook, *Ecstasy and Other Poems*, she likens poetry to procreation, the essence of both being

conception, or the process in which a new self arises from the conjoining of previously separate entities:

Swiftly mounting the tawny hillside,
Three dim forms in the dusk ascend;
Scent of woodsmoke is in their nostrils,
Murmuring secrets, the tall trees bend—

Bend and whisper, while he, the foremost,
Springing lightly from mound to mound;
Brushes aside the slender branches,
Knowing his feet on enchanted ground.

Next, the woman, with heart enraptured,
Trying to crowd with impassioned power;
A thousand days of quest and longing,
Into one beautiful, perfect hour.

White wood-ash on her hair is powdered,
Relaxed on the leafy ground she has lain;
Caressed in the arms of Mother-Nature,
Restless, she learned to rest again.

The trickling stream was an Autumn Nocturne,
Blent with its music a clear, low voice;
The few, soft snow-flakes, the camp-fire glowing,
How could her spirit not rejoice?

And now, this last, most magical moment,
Three were there, but which of them knew
That time had ceased, and centuries vanished—
Was it I alone, or did you—*Did you?*

To some, one knows, my wild surmisings,
Are a book whose pages they cannot turn;
Life does permit, though, however rarely,
One heart with another, to beat and burn.

Then did one of you share, I have often wondered,
That swift and beautiful twilight dream,
When the earth that was young and fresh and lovely,
Returned again in its dawn's first gleam?

Gone, was the world we know as modern,

We were slender, graceful splendidly nude;
With the speed of fauns, we mounted the hillside,
But who was pursuer, and who pursued?

Months have passed, but I still recapture,
The sense of freedom, of speed, and grace;
The perfect health, and the oneness with Nature,
That filled me there, in that mystical place.³

The third-person narrative perspective, which governs the first five stanzas, changes at the moment of intercourse, when man and woman conceive a child. Who is it who realizes the age-old victory of life, which repels encroaching time by copying itself afresh? Not this or that person alone, but you and I together. The characters seem almost to be deer, hunter becomes hunted, and a child is conceived, but the mystery of the self in this poem goes beyond the usual biological-romantic clichés. The repetition and italicization of the second-person pronoun in the sixth stanza gives the poem a self-reflexive dimension: the poet seems to turn from her lover (“you”) directly to address either her child or the reader (“*you*”). The luminous enlarging of life’s conscious centre suddenly becomes congruent with our reading this poem. It is no coincidence that at its climax the poem leaps from love to reading, abruptly shifting the metaphor of conception. As the seventh stanza makes clear, we who can turn the pages of Catley’s book and interpret her “wild surmisings” feel her life beating within us. As man and woman conceive a child, poet and reader conceive a new self. By the end of the poem, our estate as reader has been enlarged: it is not Catley but we who have camped in the Albertan foothills; we remember the unity that filled us there in that mystical place. She reaches out for someone with whom to “share” her dream, and we fulfill the wish, assimilating her words into our own experience. Her act of conception has made her life into a book that others, that *you*, can possess. I do not mean to suggest that Catley’s use of this metaphor is original—quite the opposite. In tapping into the idea of reading as the appropriative incorporation of different elements into a new self, her poem invokes a theme of prior and larger existence.

This theme runs through the ten fine essays that follow. The editorial goal behind this issue of *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* was to add freely to the field of reading studies, to generate new matter for scholarly regard without premeditated conformity to the major theses of recent years, out of

respect that whatever the relative magnetism of these the field remains essentially inexhaustible, every reader being in some aspect unique.⁴ The question poses itself anew and seems as fresh and as challenging as ever: what is the history of reading? “New Studies in the History of Reading” answers with the desired variety, both in content, each author focusing on a different historical sequence, technological support, or theoretical concern involving reading, and in language, the gap between English, French, and German in the following papers serving to remind us, I hope, of the knowledge that may be and probably is proliferating rapidly but elsewhere on our topic of research, unbeknownst to us or our usual peers. Those who read more than one of the essays below will immediately sense their diversity, and, by extension, the sheer richness of reading as an object of study. Variety, however, has not been the only harvest. Over and over again these essays announce the theme elaborated above, whether by capturing specific readers in the act of making meaning, or by reflecting more generally on the interplay of literacy and autonomy.

Let us begin with the stars. One need look no further than the word *sunrise* to see the contingency of all interpretation. For centuries we have known that night and day result from the rotation of the earth, and yet we still speak of the movement of the sun. The world is refracted through our own perspective. Human beings (and other living things) construct meaning where they need it, selectively perceiving phenomena and rendering them into sign, shape, and story. This tenet of relativism, anchored to the philosophy of Wittgenstein, is the basis upon which Hans-Joachim Griep pieces together the origins of astrology and astronomy in three early advanced civilizations. When nomadic tribes settled in Egypt in the fifth millennium BCE, for example, they looked to the night sky for agricultural clues, the ascent of one star in particular, Sirius, heralding the annual flooding of the Nile and thus signalling the moment to sow the crop. Religion flourished around such signs. The star was more (and less) than a star: to them it was Sopdet, the spirit of the Nile and the goddess of fertility and rebirth, who gave them the knowledge they needed to survive. Griep’s short and accessible essay on ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Mayan reading, which appears here in German and English, is the result of his graciously agreeing to summarize the first chapter of his recent book on the history of reading before the invention of print; other chapters cover the

origins of medicine, the invention of writing, and the reading cultures of Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe.⁵

As Mayan priests took what they needed from the sky, so nineteenth-century American readers served themselves from the universe of the daily newspaper. A scrapbook from about 1840 preserved at the New-York Historical Society incarnates a historical reading experience that would not otherwise be apparent given the rough-and-tumble, masculine world of commerce and politics that was the dailies' focus. The scrapbook—a ship's log book whose pages have been pasted over with countless items clipped from newspapers—appears to be the work of one Almira C. Loveland, a middle-class poet and temperance advocate of some repute, who became an editor of the monthly magazine of a benevolent society. This artifact allows Laura Murray to reach past the sensationalism and bravado of the newspapers themselves to the genteel readers who consumed them. Murray argues that the scrapbook shows more than one woman's private reception of the news. It was a proper space where the poet-activist both recoiled from and punched back into the world, selecting, cutting, arranging, and pasting printed columns written by herself and others in a manner that strikingly anticipates her work as editor. In its “collage strategy,” the scrapbook resembles editorial copy. Both objects are eclectic and composite, embodying the ways in which readers take stock of, re-shape, and respond to the world.

The transformation of poetry in nineteenth-century Canada from hobby or patriotic gesture into serious vocation likewise owes itself to the local appropriation of print—in this case, of books containing the Romantic topos of the unhappy poet, whose genius is proportional to the intensity of his suffering. What led Émile Nelligan at century's end famously to conceive of himself as a golden ship with diaphanous flanks, wrecked upon the rocks of despair, plundered by hatred and madness, and sinking into the abyss of dream?⁶ The answer, Pascal Brissette contends, was Quebec's mid-century absorption of the legend of Gilbert. *Gilbert ou le poète malheureux* (1840) was one of several novels that fictionalized the life of the eighteenth-century French writer, Nicolas Gilbert. It freely recounts his departure from a happy rural home, his rising literary fortunes in Paris, an unfortunate riding accident, a botched surgery, and finally the creation of a sublime poem amidst mortal spasms of insanity. It was this story, read aloud in the evening

by a cousin, that led a young Louis-Honoré Fréchette to pronounce the fateful vow, “je veux être poète” (I want to be a poet). Combining literary references and bibliographic evidence, Brissette reconstructs Gilbert’s permeation of Quebec literary culture, ultimately showing how Fréchette took or mistook the didactic Roman Catholic novel for an absolute glorification of literature. His interpretation—his appropriation—of the legend helped form the mould into which Nelligan’s aureate sadness would pour itself a generation later.

Fréchette’s and Nelligan’s adoption of Gilbert highlights the inextricability of reading and creativity. What is *inspiration* but the intake of some vital element and the transformation of it into new energy and motive? “Let us not forget that the most creative readers often become authors,” writes Claire Bruyère in her essay, which abounds with examples of this theme. Bruyère surveys recent adaptations of the work of five American writers from a century ago, showing how the reading of “outmoded” fiction and poetry is issuing in all sorts of new works; the chronicling of this unfolding phenomenon must set arbitrary limits for itself, so numerous are the instances. To take but one: Sherwood Anderson’s 1921 poem, “The Dumb Man,” is in the public domain; Alex Wilson recorded an oral reading of it and posted this on his web site; Lainy Voom encountered the audiofile and turned it into an animated short (<http://vimeo.com/609147>). Thus Voom’s reading both gives rise to a new work of art and refers back to the original, and Bruyère uses it as one of many examples of the fact that adaptation cannot be reduced to mere imitative profiteering. Moreover, Voom’s open distribution of her film under a Creative Commons licence acknowledges the key role that the public domain played in her own creative activity, which depended on the free appropriation of striking sources. The evidence in support of the view that copyright law must temper ownership with broad freedoms of access and use was already vast;⁷ here is still more.

In fact, property in texts extends so far beyond original authorship that the distinction between *owners* and *users*, common in contemporary intellectual-property discourse, substantially deteriorates, leaving behind an atrophied shell. Readers *are* owners of the text, not only through their purchase of a physical copy, but also by virtue of their mental fulfillment and alteration of its import. They combine it with other texts and experiences, and they carry aphoristic distillations of it into campaigns that the author does not foresee.

Its ideas, its meanings, are theirs. Roland Barthes made this point eloquently years ago;⁸ Stéphane Courant returns to it in a remarkable new manner. Examining letters that tourists have written to the publisher of the Lonely Planet guidebooks, Courant identifies a class of readers whose internalizing possession of the text is so fierce that they will stubbornly follow its directives even when plainly at odds with the actual world. Likening them to Rabelaisian sheep who all leap into the sea if one does, Courant discusses these travellers' collective adherence to the guidebook notwithstanding its errors as something of a socially mimetic quixotic dream: they prefer the city that they have constructed from their reading to the city that the local inhabitants (or even street signs) would show them if only they asked. In this exaggerated case, the reader is in fact the only owner of the text, for while he passionately clings to it, the author/publisher will repudiate it with an updated and corrected edition.

Capturing readers' mental fulfillment of the text will always be the most tantalizing and elusive of goals. For every reader who writes to Lonely Planet or compiles a scrapbook of newspaper clippings, there are a thousand who leave no trace of their interpretation. Three of the essays that follow distinguish themselves in the innovative and rigorous empirical methods with which they tackle the problem of knowing what contemporary readers make of a text. DeNel Rehberg Sedo and Anatolij Gruzd provide an account of the first book club conducted through the online social network, Twitter. Since participation in One Book, One Twitter (#1b1t) consists of typing and posting short messages, it generates enormous amounts of data of readers' experiences in a form that is more recoverable than the thoughts aired orally in traditional book clubs. Rehberg Sedo and Gruzd analyze some 14,000 "tweets" from the club's first year of activity (2010–11), when it discussed Neil Gaiman's 2001 novel, *American Gods*; they experiment with new programs such as Netlytic and ORA to relay the content and map out the structure of the club's discussion.

Paul Sopčák and Don Kuiken measure the existentialist insights that Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* stimulates in contemporary readers using the method of numerically aided phenomenology. Roughly, this consists of gathering the commentaries of a sample of readers on selected passages from the novel, breaking them down into their constituent ideas, assigning each a score based on the presence or absence of these constituents, and

then classifying them into clusters or reading profiles based on their score. Sopčák and Kuiken effectively demonstrate that whereas some readers impassively see the text as a sequence of external events, others empathically feel it to be an expression of their own plight; a few even register, in response to the text, a mature will to live despite the certainty of death. The scrupulous psychological method amounts to an ambitious initiative to catch sight of that inner process of readers enlarging their estates.

J.L. Pecoskie conducted interviews with 19 women in Southern Ontario between 2004 and 2006 in an empirical study aimed at understanding the ways in which reading builds community among those who identify themselves as lesbian or bisexual. She records instances of readers recognizing themselves in others' writing—"aha!" moments in which they are surprised to find their own innermost selves in the published, autobiographical precedent of others. The possession and placement of lesbian books within the home and the frequenting of queer bookstores likewise emerge from the study as important ways in which one may connect to others with a similar orientation. Pecoskie characterizes this complex, social, print-based process of identity formation as an interaction between private and public spheres of meaning: the women's reading amounts to a grafting of others' experiences onto their own life narrative.

The last two essays collected here contemplate the pressure that new technology is exerting on reading. In order to begin to gauge the impact of the new electronic tablets on reading practices, one must first cut through the promotional haze that enshrouds them. Julia Bonaccorsi does this by critically interpreting recent iPad advertisements as the latest manifestation of an old theme in visual art, namely, the scene of reading. The giant ads, which appeared in metro tunnels and publicity kiosks in 2010, show the reclining torsos (no heads) of chic young people holding the luminous tablet in their lap and touching the cover of their favourite magazine as displayed on its screen. Bonaccorsi mines this image for its complex effects and what these may tell us about the cultural shape of reading as pushed by electronics producers. One such effect, in contrast to earlier advertisements for books and newspapers, is the presentation of the text as something more seen than read. With its giant body, blank background, and *mise en abîme* (magazine within tablet within advertisement frame), the ad engulfs the passerby: we are made voyeurs who simultaneously recoil from and free-

fall into a scene divorced from normal dimensions of time and place. The magazine is both too close and too far. It is a mere cover image and it is a portal into the infinite text of the Internet. It glows on the full screen, but only after the right combination of touches calls it up out of the darkness of the machine. Without a comprehensive view or grasp of the text, comprehension of it falters, and merely having the text (*le tenir*) reverts to the difficulty of remembering it (*le retenir*). Bonaccorsi's semiotic analysis upholds the principle of hermeneutic sovereignty in its insistence that what remains most desirable is not the power of the computer processor but that of the human subject, whose interpretive dissection of the text will be proportional to his or her physical control of it. Readers should have heads.

The corollary is that it is our duty as a society to maintain and nurture interpretive faculties according to the pace of technological change. Practically, this may entail the reconceiving of literacy, particularly as we apply the term to children's and young people's acquisition of skills necessary to thrive in complex informational-commercial environments. Monique Lebrun, Nathalie Lacelle, and Jean-François Boutin answer this conceptual challenge with their theory of *multimodal media literacy*, which they define as the ability to read and produce new media, or to read and produce meanings with new media, especially as these evolve and recombine. It is not a matter of merely showing students a relevant film after they have read a text; rather, the task is to allow students to access new media, to create their own content using new media, and to analyze and evaluate their own and others' use of new media. How, for example, does a particular mode of communication (such as a social networking web site) tend to affect the content that can be transmitted across it? What semiotic resources (such as facial expressions, music, text-message abbreviations, pop-up windows) are mobilized in a given communication and to what effect? Because the world through which young people move is saturated with media, it is important to give them the opportunity to step back and critique the form, content, and cultural situation of the messages that are constantly cascading around them, so that they may cultivate attitudes of solitude amidst the action—attitudes in which the mind may maintain its full, fruitful work on itself.

“Buh... bah... ll... leh.. een... *Baleine*.” My six-year-old son is reading. After years of alphabet fridge magnets, picture books, and scrawling letters to parental applause, he has quite suddenly stepped beyond all such warm-ups,

admittedly equal parts encouragement and constraint. The aptitude is blossoming in him now according to its own logic, and any text that comes within sight feeds it—street signs, titles of chapters, shampoo bottles, printed flyers, homework, the lettering on the piano. He wraps his mouth around words, raising up prodigious phonemes from the letterforms and then suddenly recognizing the familiar mammalian essence within them. He will increasingly turn this newfound skill to his own ends, grasping what is strange, laying claim to it, and changing himself in the process.

Here, it seems, in this most immediate of examples is yet another illustration of reading as claiming—as grasping the third person and transmuting it into the first—the theme that the ten essays in “New Studies in the History of Reading” present in various aspects. Admittedly, it can itself be construed as a thing of the contemporary moment, a product of individualism and the widespread twenty-first-century academic interest in forms of power and agency. This theme was not projected in the planning of the issue but has arisen in editorial analysis after the fact, seeming to assert itself through the essays themselves, first individually and then together. If it is just, however—if these studies tend to present reading as appropriative—then it reveals a tension that runs to the heart of the history of reading as a discipline. What present metaphors, structuring our concept of reading, govern our historical inquiry? We strive to know how others have read elsewhere and thus to glimpse the cultural evolution and variety of a practice through time and space, but we cannot approach this historical object without passing through how we ourselves read, here and now.

Eli MacLaren is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at McGill University and Banting Postdoctoral Fellow (2011–13) in the Department of English Language and Literature at Carleton University. His book, *Dominion and Agency: Copyright and the Structuring of the Canadian Book Trade, 1867–1918*, was published by the University of Toronto Press in 2011. His current research focuses on the Ryerson Poetry Chap-Books (Toronto, 1925–1960) as a complex point of convergence among copyright law, the publishing industry, and literary culture. He has been a member of the publications committee of the Bibliographical Society of Canada since 2007.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Laura Murray for reading a draft of this introduction and suggesting ideas that have improved it markedly.

² Marcel Proust, *On Reading*, trans. and ed. by Jean Autret and William Burford (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 11–17, 31. The edition is a facing-page translation, the passages quoted above being originally as follows: “*mon imagination s’exalte en se sentant plongée au sein du non-moi*” (16); “*ce miracle fécond d’une communication au sein de la solitude*” (30); “*J’ai essayé de montrer dans les notes dont j’ai accompagné ce volume que la lecture ne saurait être ainsi assimilée à une conversation, fût-ce avec le plus sage des hommes; que ce qui diffère essentiellement entre un livre et un ami, ce n’est pas leur plus ou moins grande sagesse, mais la manière dont on communique avec eux, la lecture, au rebours de la conversation, consistant pour chacun de nous à recevoir communication d’une autre pensée, mais tout en restant seul, c’est-à-dire en continuant à jouir de la puissance intellectuelle qu’on a dans la solitude et que la conversation dissipe immédiatement, en continuant à pouvoir être inspiré, à rester en plein travail fécond de l’esprit sur lui-même*” (30).

³ Catley, Elaine M. “Fall in the Foothills—A Phantasy,” in *Ecstasy and Other Poems*, Ryerson Poetry Chap-Book (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1927), 3–4.

⁴ Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); H.J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Heather Murray, *Come, Bright Improvement! The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Shafquat Towheed et al., *The History of Reading*, 3 vol. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For an anthology of major contributions to the field over the past several decades, see Shafquat Towheed, Rosalind Crone, and Katie Halsey, eds., *The History of Reading: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵ Hans-Joachim Griep, *Geschichte des Lesens: Von den Anfängen bis Gutenberg* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2005).

⁶ Émile Nelligan, “Le vaisseau d’or,” in Louis Dantin, *Émile Nelligan et son œuvre*, ed. Réjean Robidoux, Bibliothèque du nouveau monde (Montréal: Les presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1997), 115.

⁷ Adrian Johns, *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009); Laura J. Murray and Samuel E. Trosow, *Canadian Copyright: A Citizen’s Guide*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007.

⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 1967, reprinted in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (New York: Routledge, 2002), 221–24.

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