theories and methodologies

Introduction to "Reading over Time"

FAYE HALPERN AND PETER J. RABINOWITZ

"NO STORY IS THE SAME TO US AFTER A LAPSE OF TIME," GEORGE ELIOT WRITES IN *ADAM BEDE*, "OR RATHER, WE WHO READ IT ARE NO LONGER the same interpreters" (547). This *PMLA* feature explores the implications of reencountering texts at different moments over the course of a life. Recent years have seen lively debates in an expanding scholarly conversation about the emergence of "late style" in the work of artists, composers, and writers nearing the end of their lives. Much less has been said, however, about how the experience of viewing, listening, and reading might change over time. More specifically, might there be a late—or, for that matter, an early—style in reading and interpretation? What differences are likely to emerge with age and experience? How might political and cultural developments, shifts in aesthetic fashion, emerging critical perspectives, or the vicissitudes of personal history contribute to changes in how we perceive a text over time? And how do the changing perceptions of reading over time affect our scholarly efforts and pedagogical engagements?

The idea for this feature originated in a panel, sponsored by the forum TC Age Studies, at the 2016 MLA Annual Convention. The organizers, Cynthia Port and Peter Rabinowitz, noted how strongly the topic resonated. As the essays here suggest, *reading over time* names something important that we all do as literary critics, pleasure readers, and teachers. Yet it is something we rarely have the chance to reflect on. As the feature developed over time, we discovered one reason why this is so, for the very act of writing these essays often pushed us in directions that defied the protocols of our profession.

In part, we are discouraged from reflecting on our evolution as readers because academic writing puts strictures on autobiographical revelation, strictures that have weakened in recent years but that still hold some sway. More influential, though, may be the subtle precept that every published scholarly interpretation should be decisive. The interpretation may be complex; we may be aware that it is but one step in a process where it will—probably in short order—be forgotten, built on, or challenged by other critics. Still, we want to believe

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that the process is one of development, that the interpretation represents our best current thinking, and that any new interpretations will be improvements. Conventional literary criticism requires, in other words, that we present ourselves as unconflicted interpreters.

The essays in this feature reveal that reading over time, at least for the five of us, is much messier than that. The contributions suggest we do not remain the same kind of readers we once were. We ourselves change, and so do our interpretations, for myriad reasons—among them, evolving theoretical or ethical commitments, encounters with a wider diversity of texts, changing interests, changing relations to the academic community or to the politics around us, experiences in the classroom, or aging itself. But whatever the roots of the changes, we have discovered that these decisive new interpretations don't always supplant the older ones that they may seem to improve on. Instead, they often cluster alongside the older ones, even when present and past interpretations don't get along. Simultaneously, then, we came to see our past interpretations as far more unfinished and contingent than they seemed when we first developed them, but at the same time we found them more enduring. Rabinowitz and Susan Lanser explicitly make the point—but the other authors reinforce it—that these different reading selves remain, and remain conflicted, speaking to and against who we are now.

We might have written "haunted" instead of "conflicted," if it did not sound rather strange. Yet another way to see this feature is as a collection of ghost stories. These essays are marked by the persistence of voices that we imagine (and sometimes hope) long departed: the voices of past students (Rabinowitz), of critics we thought we had laid to rest (Halpern), of a self-enclosed formalism (Hochman), of nagging relatives (Port), of our past reading selves (Halpern, Hochman, Lanser, Rabinowitz), and of our projected expectations (Port). Like all self-respecting ghosts, ours call on us to think about the past—our own, our discipline's, our wider culture's. These ghosts clamor to be remembered and won't let us go. But if reading over time summons us to think about the past, it also points us toward the future. We hope that the set of questions raised here will be taken up by new voices, engaging with new texts, offering perspectives different from those represented here. But in any case, we write with the knowledge that our relation to our touchstone texts will keep on changing, until . . .

Reading over time, of course, has a built-in limit.

Note

We recognize the relative homogeneity of the corpus on which, collectively, we are reading over time. Most of these texts were written by white, Western, Christian, post-Enlightenment writers. In part this is an accident of the panel configuration itself—that is, of the individuals who submitted proposals for the session. It may also be a result of the focus of the original MLA forum, which may have encouraged panelists of a certain age. Because they were asked to consider career-long engagements with texts, the original panelists tended to focus their attention on a narrower set of texts than are widely discussed in the discipline today. We must therefore consider the experiences of "reading over time" represented here to be contingent in terms of both reader identity and the changing canon. It is our hope that diverse experiences of "reading over time" will emerge to develop what is a new aspect of theory and scholarship on readerly practices.

Work Cited

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