The Pathos of Reading

MARY A. FAVRET

HOW OFTEN AND IN HOW MANY WAYS HAVE READERS SUFFERED in their attempts to process the printed page? Without electricity or perfectly translucent windows, without the widespread availability of spectacles or adequate treatment for eye diseases, when newsprint is smeared and type font minuscule, without Braille or magnifying software, what might reading feel like? Many histories of literacy and print culture, as well as theories of reading, assume an ideal eye under ideal conditions: proper light, clean air, crisply legible materials. Examining the cognitive and historical dimensions of reading, we often ignore the physical and affective burdens reading puts on some readers, in some environments. We neglect the moments when reading becomes hardly possible and illegibility threatens. Yet throughout its history impediments and disabilities have contributed to the feeling of reading. We need only picture the child with dyslexia struggling with the page before him or list the various devices marketed to make reading easier on eyes, mind, and body to call up the pains of reading.

Cognitive linguists point to the unconscious and automatic neural processes that account for most of what we call reading comprehension: the "systematicity" that fills in and finishes a word or a phrase that was only half-noticed by our scanning eyes. Such systematicity allows us to forget what we see when we read: the black marks on white pages (or screens) disappear from view almost immediately, encouraging us to see otherwise, our vision taken to some other, virtual scene. We read on "viewless wings of Poesy," we might say (Keats, *Keats's Poetry* 458).[1] But other systems and histories are at work well before cognition is set in motion and after it has finished its job. Before it can unleash its virtual wonders or elicit our identifications and sympathy, reading depends fundamentally on sensory

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perception (especially but not solely vision) embedded in a historically given world.[2]

Those who take reading as their profession, Mark Turner notes, have rarely attended to the actual operations of reading. "We [literary critics] take for granted," he writes, "our capacities to invent and interpret, and devote ourselves to exercising those capacities and publishing the results." He continues, "It is the capacities themselves that need explaining. Reading is not *giving a reading*. . . . Giving readings is important and could be done better *if we understood reading*. . . . The most amazing phenomenon our profession confronts, and the one for which we have the least explanation, is that a reader *can* make sense of a text . . ." (19). Of course, if you are one of those readers who find it hard to read and can therefore only irregularly slide into unconscious systematicity, then you are not taking the process for granted. Reading within an imperfect system, you may be reading, ironically, better than others.

Turner addresses "our profession," but to what degree is pained or obstructed reading an appropriate object for a literary scholar—rather than, say, a reading specialist, therapist, neurologist, or ophthalmologist?[3] This article does not provide a material history of reading practices (how dim was the light by which they read? how dense the smoke in the room? how common was eye disease?). Rather, it assembles scenes of pathetic reading that depict individuals who can hardly read and can therefore teach us about reading, especially the feeling of reading. In each case the scene is located within imperfect conditions for reading—but ambiguously so. At times the difficulty appears—familiarly—to inhere in the corporeal limitations of the individual reader, perhaps aging or ill. Yet the barrier to reading might alternatively rest in the opacities of a given world. In these chosen instances the historically given world is literalized in the landscape of the modern city (modern here taken broadly as stretching from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries). In each case, the city itself both demands and damages the capacity to read. The city, that is, provides not a backdrop but an environment for reading that the reader within the scene attempts to navigate. Set against an internalized and personal view of reading, these urban scenes propose reading as an impersonal activity, exigent and impossible to master. Taken together, they suggest that in his pained attempts to read, the reader in particular suffers modernity.

These scenes—taken from the works of Walter Benjamin, W. G. Sebald, and John Keats—all resituate a dilemma at the heart of Romantic aesthetics. As Friedrich Kittler has proposed, "It was the passion of all reading to hallucinate meaning between lines and letters" (10). This passion gives rise to "the visible and audible world of romantic poetics" that Kittler also refers to as an imaginary "paradise" or "hereafter." Within this dynamic, can the subjective experience of reading have any objective correlative, here and now, in the given world? How can we transfer what we experience as readers into the world we perceive around us? The examples here, all Romantic in disposition, test that question by inverting it: Will the surrounding world allow us to read? And if it does, will the reading passion take a different form? Will we then suffer? As they trouble the boundary between inner and outer, mental and sensory understandings of reading, these scenes release its pathos.

[I]

Pathos meant "suffering" or "experience" in ancient Greek (from πάσχειν: to suffer) but is also translated as "passion" or "emotion" ("Pathos"). When Aristotle codified pathos as one of the three modes of rhetoric, a way of "awakening" passion in an audience, he tied it simultaneously to a technique and science of emotion. For him, effective rhetorical pathos requires the speaker "to understand

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the emotions—that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited" (119). Pathos could thus indicate first-order, "suffered" feelings; second-order emotion (produced in response to representation or performance); and the knowing effort to blur any difference between these two levels. Yet pathos as knowledge or science remains elusive: can we spot true emotion when we see it? We deride something as pathetic when we believe we know when to withhold emotion and how to distinguish worthy from unworthy pathos. Even made ironic in this way, though, the adjective registers agitation or discomfort. If the scenes of reading in this article recall how physically entangled an activity reading is, they also complicate our awareness of what it means to suffer or experience reading—when reading about reading.

In her analysis of the role of pathos in Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, Rei Terada pursues further the question of discomfort and uncertainty at work in pathos, in ways that bear especially on the scene of reading. For de Man, emotions in general "hypothesize" and thus signal uncertainty (de Man 150–51). Characterized by "a [potential] discrepancy between the inner and the outer properties of an entity"—between, say, surface appearance and inward state, between what one sees and what one imagines—emotions baffle empirical or analytic proof (150). As Terada elaborates, emotions "jump the gun," popping up in "hermeneutically difficult situations" when one's ability to interpret—let's say *read*—falters ("Pathos" 38, 37). Emotions nevertheless resist their hypothetical nature, proposing their own cause or proper meaning. They define in order to secure themselves. They move to put uncertainty—and the vagaries of interpretation—to rest (de Man 151).[4] In this sense, emotions, like much fiction, ask to be taken as real and true. Pathos arrives as the witness to the efforts by emotion to verify itself. It is the felt recognition that whatever meaning or certainty emotion arrives at is going to be figural. As Terada puts it, "*pathos* is the revenant emotion of allegory," a second-order feeling born of the discrepancy between emotion and certainty ("Pathos" 42).

To understand why and how scenes of reading can be pathetic, we need to acknowledge the irony built into any piece of writing that aims to describe clearly—with certainty—obstructed reading. I will start with an account from Oliver Sacks's *The Mind's Eye* that appears to keep pathos at arm's length. His account decouples reading from the sensuous body, does not acknowledge its emotional effects, and seems unaware of its inherent ironies. His scene of obstructed reading thus serves as counterexample to the Romantic and pathetic features of my subsequent cases. Sacks quotes a patient describing the onset of alexia, a neurological condition that left him unable to read though he could still see.[5] One morning the man picked up his newspaper and found that the newsprint "looked like Cyrillic one moment and Korean the next. Was this a Serbo-Croatian version of the *Globe*, made for export?" (53). Driven to the hospital by his son, the man cannot make sense of the city he lives in, Toronto; unable to read street signs, he sees "familiar landmarks in unfamiliar places" (54). Simultaneously and almost ostentatiously the alexic man displays his knowingness. We understand his professed bewilderment is rhetorical ("Was this a Serbo-Croatian version . . . ?"). As the swirling uncertainties of the episode fade, so too does any acknowledgment of emotion. "Panic should have hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks," he reports. Instead he was "suffused with a *reasonable* calm" because he believed he was capable of accurately reading the signs of his condition: he was certain he had "suffered a stroke" (54; emphasis added).

Sacks's written account poses no obvious difficulty to able readers. The prose is clean, the type (Garamond) well spaced, characters from the Latin alphabet well fixed on the

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page. So if you can read Sacks's sentences, you do not read as this patient reads. The passage assumes lexical competency even as it describes alexia. In the relay between what you might feel (pity, anxiety, sorrow) in response to the poor man's plight and what the man feels, pathos could be mobilized. But Sacks's patient is not presented as "poor" but rather "*reasonabl[y]* calm" and knowledgeable. His story forestalls pathos—at first glance. The account of alexia, which opens as a tale of uncertainty (Cyrillic? Korean?), backhandedly announces emotion ("panic") even as it renames and tempers it (into "reasonable calm") and then replaces it with verifiable fact (a stroke that medical testing would later confirm). Yet the ambiguities built into emotion persist. At the very moment that the passage tilts toward professed certainty, excessive figuration introduces indeterminacy. The arch, self-conscious simile, "like a proverbial ton of bricks," undoes any thought of stabilizing a hypothetical panic: the figurative language—or the canceled emotion?—seems to release figuration from each subsequent line. The final stroke, meant to settle the question, cannot help replaying that metaphorical hit, calling into question its own referential status. The closing verb "suffer"—the beating heart of pathos—only reopens the discrepancy within feeling, as it hovers between mind and body, between "the inner and outer properties of an entity." In such a scene, the capacity to read—lost, assumed, displaced, undone, demanded—is haunted by pathos. Tracking metaphor, simile, and rhetorical question in the passage, we might be led as well to question their source: is Sacks giving us a verbatim transcription of the patient's words (he uses quotation marks)?[6] This ambiguity between first- and second-handedness will persist in the subsequent examples.

My point is not to justify de Man's account so much as to note its particular, almost overdetermined pertinence for thinking about the pathos attached to written representations of pained or difficult reading. In scenes of reading, pathos has the capacity to "reinstate referentiality in a negative form"—that is, to reintroduce the question (Terada, "Pathos" 42). If we take scenes of pathetic reading as, in de Man's terms, allegories of reading, what can we learn about what reading feels like or about the uncertainties that govern the practice? To what extent does it take place within an individual consciousness or out there, in a system separate from any individual you or me? Each of the following examples of strained or obstructed reading makes an emotional appeal to its audience in a very specific way: as fellow *readers*, alike vulnerable to and yet distracted from failures to read. Even as they represent the difficult phenomenon of reading as an issue of physics, and therefore of an empirically verifiable world of stricken brain cells or weak eyes or old bodies or poor light or blurred page, the pathos of the scenes discloses the burden of something else, more suffered than known and forever illegible. Precisely when reading pictures itself as an activity—successful or not—performed out there, in the given world, we glimpse the pathos of reading.

[II]

When one knows that something will soon be removed from one's gaze, that thing becomes an image.
—Walter Benjamin (53)

The modern image is . . . pure form and pure pathos.
—Jacques Rancière (34)

Walter Benjamin's report "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (1938) provides an allegorized self-portrait: Maxime Du Camp, photographer and writer, stands on the old new bridge, the Pont Neuf, "one afternoon in 1862" and gazes at his city with newly old eyes. "Haussmann's activity [redesigning Paris] was at its height and entire neighborhoods were being torn down" (52). Du Camp has come from

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an optician's shop, where new glasses are being prepared for him. So he gazes at Paris, his eyesight for the moment unassisted.

> The author, who was at the threshold of old age, experienced one of those moments when a man who thinks about his past life finds his own melancholy reflected in everything. The slight deterioration of his eyesight which had been demonstrated on his visit to the optician reminded him of the inevitable infirmity of all human things. . . . It suddenly occurred to this man—who had traveled widely in the Orient, who was acquainted with desert sands made of the dust of the dead—that this city too, this city bustling all around him, would have to die someday, the way so many capitals had died. . . . In a flash of inspiration, the kind that occasionally furnishes one with an extraordinary subject, he resolved to write the kind of book about Paris that the historians of antiquity had failed to write about their cities. . . . In his mind's eye, he could see the work of his mature old age. (52–53)[7]

Benjamin's larger point in this passage, which he borrows from Paul Bourget's tribute to Du Camp, is the imagined erasure of the city, its bustling swallowed by the dust of history, its future antiquity flashing on its present. This extraordinary leveling of the world capital, a process Benjamin (with Baudelaire) equates with modernity, allows for the writing of a kind of book that has never before been written: a modern report on Paris. Indeed, the work of Du Camp's mature old age, his six-volume *Paris: Ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e^ siècle* (1869–75), serves as precedent for Benjamin's essay and inspiration for his own *Arcades* project.

Yet another dynamic, equally modern, works through this passage. It springs from the optician's shop and the spectacles being ground there. It forces the question, What happens when the urban features that Benjamin's essay relentlessly explores—the sketches and engravings, the feuilletons and placards, the material of legibility in the city—present themselves to one with diminished eyesight? Or, rather, what does the one with poor eyesight see instead of the supposedly given facts of the modern city, this outer world? It seems important that Du Camp has had to put aside prosthetic devices, his glasses as well as his camera, and walk away from the optician's shop to receive this modern prospect laden with the "inevitable infirmity of all human things." It seems important too that here, as elsewhere in the essay and in the world of print, color is absent. Gray tones must serve. In the movement of this passage, the deterioration of vision externalized by the presence of that optician's shop prompts a melancholic if not elegiac projection onto the urban landscape, which suddenly loses its solid outlines and appears ready to disintegrate. That deterioration allows for the transfer of the present scene, poorly seen, to the sudden flash and near ecstasy of the subsequent image: "in the mind's eye" he *can* see—and presumably read—his book to be.[8] Modernity here is to be read and written by the visually impaired.

W. G. Sebald updates Benjamin's tale of Du Camp in his novel *Austerlitz* (2001), where the transfer of past into present and of visual urban detail into the writing of modernity occurs again—and again against the prospect of future annihilation. "Somehow," Sebald's narrator observes, "we know by instinct that the outsize buildings [of modern cities] cast the shadow of their own destruction before them and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins" (19). And again, this dynamic composes itself under the aegis of the failing eye. Of the eponymous Jacques Austerlitz, a man compelled to document with photographs "the architectural style of the capitalist era," we learn early on that he always clutched "a worn spectacle case . . . in his left hand," sometimes "so tightly that you could see the white of his knuckles beneath the skin" (33, 32). We never learn if he wears his spectacles or leaves them unused in that clenched case. But the black-and-white photographs re-

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produced in the novel betray a consistent blurriness, a myopic's inability to focus.[9]

Austerlitz's story, a melancholic history of loss and impermanence, violence and destruction, stretching from the eighteenth through the end of the twentieth century, is launched for us when the unnamed narrator finds he can no longer read the telephone book: "the sight in my right eye had almost entirely disappeared . . . the figures and landscapes familiar to me in every detail having resolved indiscriminately into a black and menacing cross-hatching" (35). It is a temporary condition, he learns, that affects "middle-aged men who spen[d] too much time reading and writing" (36). After visiting an ophthalmologist's office in London one December afternoon in 1996, the narrator encounters his old friend Austerlitz, whom he has not seen in twenty years. That night (despite or because of the peculiar status of his vision?) he begins to transcribe Austerlitz's extraordinary tale, the work, perhaps, of the narrator's "mature old age." From the very first page of the novel, in fact, the narrator-transcriber has been primed for this task through sudden failures of vision. Soon after his initial meeting with Austerlitz in Antwerp in 1976, the narrator visits a nearby fortress and former Nazi detainment camp and finds himself in a "world illuminated only by a few dim electric bulbs" (23). Nauseated, he sees "[b]lack striations begin to quiver before my eyes, and I had to lean my forehead against the wall" (25). The narrator's optical complaint is transferred to the protagonist and made expressly symptomatic later, when Austerlitz recounts an illness that made it impossible for him to read or write. The story he tells of that illness projects his difficulties onto the landscape of the modern city:

> If language may be regarded as an ancient city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies, with some quarters dating from far back in time while others have been torn down, cleaned up and rebuilt, and with suburbs reaching farther and farther into the surrounding country, then I was like a man who has been abroad a long time and cannot find his way through the urban sprawl anymore. . . . The entire structure of language . . . even the nouns denoting the most ordinary objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog. (123–24)

Physical collapse and obstructed vision threaten one's ability to read—that is, to navigate the city. Simultaneously, they open both Austerlitz and the narrator to the "void at the heart of the twentieth century" that the novel proceeds to delineate.[10] The city of words that cannot be clearly seen or navigated recalls Haussmann's Paris or Regency London: partly ancient, partly torn down and rebuilt. In *Austerlitz* the city of words is meant to conjure as well twentieth-century Antwerp and London—and, later, Prague and Paris. Yet the city of words merges finally with the printed page, its "fog" or "void" experienced fundamentally by Austerlitz and the narrator as impediments to reading (for Austerlitz, all language has become a matter of vision). The pathos of their reading conjures the pathos of historical awareness: obstructed, lost, desperate, and uncomprehending.

Benjamin's spirit and project—his spectacles, I want to say—are everywhere in Sebald's novel.[11] The condition of possibility for these wrenching histories is a range of optical disorders: loss of clarity and focus, loss of color and depth perception oversee the world historical losses written here. Sebald's novel ends appropriately with the narrator's describing a book, received from Austerlitz, of a man's quest to determine the origins of his Jewish Lithuanian grandfather, a man whose only remains include papers, a "worn spectacle case," and a faded photograph showing the grandfather with his one working eye and his one blinded eye (297)—not utter blindness in the face of modernity but compromised sight, vision enough to perceive vision's losses. Pathos is made literal, pathetically. The light of

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sense does not absolutely go out, and yet the felt pressure to acknowledge the outer world surrenders to the burden of something else.

These examples suggest a historical vision threatened but concurrently enabled by the inability to make those fine discriminations of feature and type required to read the surfaces of the city: its newspapers, pamphlets, signs, posters, and telephone books—"even," as Austerlirtz notes, recognizing "the nouns denoting the most ordinary objects." Such impaired sight confesses a dependency on oversize objects (*Austerlitz*'s massive architecture of the capitalist era; the "ever larger type-size" that Benjamin tells us accompanied the growth of urban advertising [13]; and, as we will see, the "remnants huge / Of stone" and titanic forms of Keats's *Hyperion* [482]). Yet this compromised vision also promises a release from the perceived exigencies of the modern world, including the demands of productive labor. When Sebald's narrator, an academic, first confronts his disability, he worries that he will no longer be able "to continue working" but simultaneously senses a freeing alternative: "a *vision* of release in which *I saw myself*, as it were, free of the constant compulsion to read and write" (35–36; emphasis added).[12] Whence the compulsion: from forces psychological or social or economic? The sources are uncertain. More curiously, as with Benjamin's Du Camp, the damage to his eyes and his consequent inability to read allow Sebald's narrator a sudden access of vision, where inside and outside meld: "I saw," he says, "myself."

I carry these thoughts forward to my reading of Keats: the dialectical and pathetic image, which reminds those who see it what they will lose sight of; the modern city, the visual surface of which may dissolve in a thickening dust or fog; the history of loss and destruction that lies within this opacity; and the strict identification—especially intense in Sebald's novel—of seeing or, more exactly, hardly seeing with the work of reading and writing.

[III]

Even as it promises visual enhancement—through the broad boulevards and architectural crescents of the rebuilt urban environment or through microscopes, telescopes, cameras, and ever more powerful and pervasive technologies of vision—modernity presumes the imperfections and limitations of the human eye. The tale is now familiar. Jonathan Crary's well-known account establishes a shift in the early nineteenth century from a "classical regime of visuality" to a modern regime first articulated in Romantic sciences and technologies (*Suspensions* 11). At the beginning of the nineteenth century "the truth of vision," according to Crary, found itself embedded "in the density and materiality of the human body" with all the epistemological uncertainty such a relocation entailed (11, 11–12; see also *Techniques*). (Perhaps this moment made vision ripe for emotion.) By mid-century, scientific consensus emphasized the faultiness of human sight. Even leaving aside a range of diagnosable optical disorders and neurological impediments (the sort of conditions that might require spectacles or surgery or therapeutic treatment), physicians then understood that all human eyes performed their task abysmally. "A long list of indictments might indeed be brought against the eye," wrote the renowned Victorian physicist John Tyndall: its opacity, lack of symmetry, and achromatism, as well as its irreparable blind spots. Tyndall echoes Hermann von Helmholz, the leading scholar of optics in the mid–nineteenth century, declaring "that if any optician sent him an instrument so full of defects [as the human eye], he would be justified in sending it back with the severest censure" (8). Such remarks reveal the expert's propensity to displace the work of vision from the human eye to the functioning of an apparatus, a propensity shared by nineteenth-century physicians, physicists, and photographers and examined in critical

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studies by Crary, Barbara Stafford, and Geoffrey Batchen, among others.[13] The tenor of these mid-nineteenth-century remarks suggests that introducing into the account of modernity, as Benjamin and Sebald do, any specific instance of deteriorating vision—a case with spectacles, as it were—would be a gratuitous gesture. If every eye is obviously flawed, why distinguish particularly faulty or diseased sight? The gratuitous gesture risks making the account pathetic.

Yet this is perhaps the point: not what modernity can unveil about the mortal limits of vision but what mortal vision feels like within the constraints of modernity. For Crary the acknowledgment of faulty, embodied vision in the early nineteenth century liberates something he calls autonomous vision from the shackles of empirical sensation (*Techniques* 62). Autonomous vision can operate virtually, in "the mind's eye"—a clear separation of "inner and outer entities." Yet within these passages from Benjamin and Sebald rumbles something that Crary's liberated vision does not quite confess: that is, the intimate conversation among pain, loss, reading, and writing embedded in this modern regime of visuality. The mind's eye or what Romanticists call the imagination may be the product of a generically imperfect human eye (that hardly registers its own imperfections), but it may also be born of an environment that strains or damages a feeling eye. In the nineteenth century, the same scientists who faulted human vision maintained that two leading causes for myopia were urban living and reading (Otter 40–41). In other words, the mind's eye, as Sebald suggests, may owe its birth equally to "a world illuminated only by a few dim electric bulbs" or to an overworked vision that sees "a black and menacing cross-hatching" when it reads. Keats offers his own take on this ambiguity in his allegory of the "Mansion of Many Apartments," which includes "dark passages" (to be read—or navigated) and where "we are in a Mist" not unlike Austerlitz's impenetrable urban fog (letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818; *Keats's Poetry* 245). This dimness, these obstacles arise not (just) because human eyes are imperfect—for Keats, they arise after "one's vision into the heart and nature of Man" has been "sharpened" (244). The mist or obstruction arises because the given world is imperfect. What the person with disabled vision discloses is something more than the everyday if underrecognized fact that even those with twenty-twenty vision see imperfectly. The person with diminished vision feels the contingencies and demands of modern visuality. She sees the loss and deterioration inherent in visible forms. She reads the modern image: "pure form and pure *pathos*" (Rancière 34).

For Sebald and Benjamin, visual impairment might, with some qualification, be attributed to the aging or tired eye, which is to say more or less to the individual body. However, concealed in the image of the optician's shop, the ophthalmologist's office, or the glasses case carried through the cities of Europe lies the suggestion that visual difficulty resides not in a single organism but elsewhere, in the routines of reading and writing endemic to modernity, which both writers locate in the city. We come to Keats now, to investigate the uncertainty, the hypothesizing emotion, of an earlier modern reader. Keats, whose letters and poems reveal how increasingly he found himself "all in a mist," looking "through a mist" or fog and who could "but dimly perceive" the truth, came to learn that such opacity provided the very ground of his poetry.[14] His considerations of reading in the city further radicalize the insights gained from Benjamin's and Sebald's work, retraining us in how to feel as we read.

[IV]

To one who has been long in city pent,
'Tis very sweet to look into the fair
And open face of heaven,—to breathe a prayer

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Full in the smile of the blue firmament.
Who is more happy, when, with heart's
content,
Fatigued he sinks into some pleasant lair
Of wavy grass, and reads a debonair
And gentle tale of love and languishment?
Returning home at evening, with an ear
Catching the notes of Philomel,—an eye
Watching the sailing cloudlet's bright career,
He mourns that day so soon has glided by:
E'en like the passage of an angel's tear
That falls through the clear ether silently.
(Keats, *Keats's Poetry* 54)

Keats's vision is not a case of spectacles; he has no obvious disability. Yet he knows what it is to "look into" a city that is neither "fair" nor "open," as this 1817 sonnet suggests. For the young Keats especially, the socioeconomic forces that tie him to the city also give the city a dark and close atmosphere. As early as the 1780s, William Cowper could complain of London's polluted light and air: "the eclipse / that Metropolitan volcanoes make / Whose Stygian throats breathe darkness all day long" (bk. 3, lines 736–38).[15] Conditions personal and environmental oppress Keats's reading and writing. We know the desperation with which Keats hoarded his money to flee London, taking cheap rooms in seaside resorts, Margate or the Isle of Wight, or hiking with Charles Brown in the northern mountains to find time and space for his art. In his early poems the imagery of impaired or obscured sight leads directly to dreams of light, color, and clean air that, as with Du Camp, erase the modern city, though in a pastoral rather than apocalyptic mode. Keats's first published poem opens with an explicitly negated image of the dingy urban environment:

O Solitude! if I must with thee dwell
Let it not be *among the jumbled heap*
Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep,—
Nature's observatory—whence the dell,
Its flowery slopes, its river's crystal swell,
May seem a span; . . .
(*Keats's Poetry* 52; emphasis added)

To his friend George Felton Matthew, Keats complains that the "coy" but "fine-eyed" muse of poetry "with me would not live in this dark city." He hopes—in raptures that mock his hope—that she will come, "[a]h! . . . whene'er I find / Some flowery spot, sequester'd, wild, romantic / That often must have seen a poet frantic" *Keats's Poetry* 41). Of course Keats finds his sequestered spots, his dells and rills, precisely where other poets have put them: on the page, in his books. The well-lit spaces out in nature rest within the binding of a book. These poetic excursions to a virtual, secondhand, green space mark Keats as a cockney, which is to say a city dweller and thus inauthentic nature poet.[16] One could say that he experiences enabling light, color, and air not with his own eyes but through the mediations of reading. Marjorie Levinson has taught us that restful bowers and restorative air loudly attest their absence in Keats's given world, this "simulated leisure" the dialectical image of "a relentless struggle to get by and get ahead" (8). The social and financial pressure to work, to read and write productively, generates pathetic figurations of pastoral ease, clear skies, and pristine writing materials—such as a tablet "whiter than a star" (Keats, *Keats's Poetry* 55).

Endymion, Keats's early, pastoral alter ego, can hardly help but take into the rural scene the vestiges of darkness and obscurity that mark Keats's London. The opening lines of *Endymion* present "gloomy days / And all the unhealthy and o'erdarken'd ways / Made for our searching," as if the shepherd-hero were plunged along with his creator into the grime of urban alleys (*Keats's Poetry* 149; bk. 1, lines 9–11). Endymion seems beset with obscuring mists and dimness, so much so that the poet tempts us to hear the chiming "dim" in the proper name as he describes "him / Whose eyelids curtain'd up their treasures dim, / Endymion" (151; lines 93–95). His eyes are not only "dim" in the knowledge of their own imperfection (he has recently

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been "dazzled" by the sight of a "passionately bright" goddess), but they are "curtain'd" as well, as if to preserve that treasured dimness and keep it within, away from the glaring light (162–63; lines 594, 601). The lidded "treasures dim" of Endymion distance him from the ancient shepherds around him who chatter on about their future in Elysium, the mythic afterworld—as if the hero were wearing dark shades. Doubly dim, Endymion cannot share the elders' cosmology: for him the leap from earth to heaven is no longer certain. A discrepancy has opened between the surface of things—the world around him—and what he has experienced in his dreams. Endymion laments his condition extravagantly. His plight, as contemporary critics were quick to point out, is pathetic.

Endymion undertakes many trials of vision, often contrasting the healthy air and light of a (lost) pastoral world to a present day of darkened, sooty prospects.[17] Ambivalence hovers over the source of the dimming mists: is it a quality of Endymion's fallen vision or of the fallen world the shepherd now beholds? The cause of visual impairment—inner or outer? individual or world?—and the vision of modernity such impairment enables cannot be settled. Instead, the pathos of that ambivalence, embedded in an awareness of historical change, as in Benjamin's and Sebald's scenes, becomes itself the condition underwriting the text we read. Finally, though, Endymion the shepherd is no reader or writer; his visual trials may respond to world-historical change, but that change appears to take place apart from the practices of literacy and the world of print. Though *Endymion* offers a useful gloss on Keats's early meditations on sight, on eyes lidded and not, it subtracts from mention the pressing questions of reading and writing.

A string of sonnets written in 1816–17, however, brings forward the poet's preoccupations with the conditions required for seeing, reading, and writing. Keats actually returns to the city from his green bowers and looks into reading itself, in a way that makes felt the assumptions and pressures that attend "dark passages." In "To My Brothers," he keenly observes George and Tom Keats as they read by the firelight. Their eyes are "fix'd" on their books, "Upon the lore so voluble and deep / That aye [eye!] at fall of night our care condoles" (*Keats's Poetry* 53; lines 7–8). Though he ventures out to "search the poles" for his own rhymes, the poet ultimately lands back inside this quiet scene, bound as it is by the brothers' awareness of its fragility.[18] The next sonnet in the series, "Keen, fitful gusts are whisp'ring here and there," lists all the vaguely threatening sensory impressions the speaker claims not to notice as he walks out on a winter night, "brimful" of the reading he has just done at the home of his friend Leigh Hunt. Invocations of Milton's *Lycidas* and Petrarch's sonnets close the poem. Overlooking this sonnet, poised at its very middle, are "silver lamps" that "burn on high." The stars (which in earlier lines "looked cold about the sky") become streetlamps that allow the poet, in a sense, to extend the experience of reading outdoors, into the dark night. The metamorphosis of stars into lamps presides over the movement from external sensory impression to the felt experience of literature: the transition from a world of keen gusts, dark night, and "cool bleak air" to internalized images of Petrarch's "lovely Laura in her light green dress" (53). We are asked, as we read the words on the page (as we forget the page we are holding, the letters we are scanning) to see how Keats is reading, to track the movements of his eyes along with his vision, and to recognize as well the pressing materiality (especially of light and night and air and books) that conditions his and his brothers' reading, even as he works to transform that materiality.

At the end of this sequence we find a more famous sonnet about reading and seeing, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer." The old debate about whether Keats could read Greek or could read Homer only in

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translation already flags of the enormous educational and class barriers built into reading (Roe). I will just mark the several modes of uninhibited vision at work in the second half of this sonnet where Keats characterizes his experience of reading: his close "looking into" of the title gives way to an outward "watching the skies"; it accompanies Cortés, "staring" with "eagle eyes," but then turns to notice that his men "look'd at each other with a wild surmise" (*Keats's Poetry* 54–55). As our eyes pass over the words of the sonnet, printed there on the page, we track movements of and in vision, we follow the many looks that follow this first look: we are asked not necessarily to stare or watch or look at each other but again to *look into reading as seeing* and weigh its significance (the present participles—"looking," "watching," "staring"—are crucial to this asking). We witness then a transformation of the visual field: from book to sky to ocean to men, a wavering spread of words, expanses, and faces that stops, in the final line, as if seeking a fixed geographic point, a sort of topographic period: "silent, on a peak in Darien." I wonder if this line is meant to generate in the mind's eye a sort of pulling back of the camera for a wide-angle shot, so that we lose the faces of the assembled men and gaze instead at this lonely and distant peak—as far as possible from the city and the room where Keats had been reading Chapman.[19] Or perhaps it registers the cessation of eye movements that had previously motivated the sonnet, offering instead the sort of closure marked in film when the screen slowly diminishes to a small dot of light in a field that proceeds to total blackout (a technique that cinematographers call an iris wipe, as if the pupil of the eye were narrowing in the presence of too much light). This same constriction of the pupil is necessary if one is to move, say, from looking at landscape to reading a page. Keats insistently highlights the work of the eye in these poems, and for him reading—the very processing of words on a page—anchors his understanding of vision, so that even as he offers poetic imagery and distant worlds, he calls us back to the matter of letters on a page.

The dynamic of expansion and contraction, of reading ceding to seeing ceding to reading, in fluctuations of legibility and illegibility that result in "wild surmise," both intensifies and broadens in the sonnet whose overt pathos inspired this article. Tucked between "Keen, fitful gusts" and "On first looking into," we find "To one who has been long in city pent" (quoted at the beginning of this section), a remarkable rendering of the conditions of reading, vision, and image in the modern city. The sonnet centers on a dialectical image of reading, seen but also invisible, given to be taken away. Here Keats evokes the sweetness of "looking into"—the phrase he also uses when reading Chapman's Homer—"looking into the fair and open face" of a "Heaven" found outside the city, as if heaven were at once face and book. The sonnet describes reading in three steps: the opening octet, where his protagonist looks into the sky before (a hypothetical) settling down with a tale to be read; the hiatus that links the first and third steps—that is, the unseen and for us unread scene of proposed reading; and the closing sestet, which absorbs that unseen reading and offers an alternative, pathetic reading of moving passages.

The opening of the sonnet speculates on the experience of a city dweller moving out to clearer air, looking into the face of a smiling blue sky—a large and distant, not a proximate face—and then sinks into "the wavy grass" to read. His frenchified adjective for the material to be read—a "debonair tale"—though seemingly merely precious, nonetheless promises salutary "good air." *De bon air*: you have to pause over the letters to get the pun. It catches the echo of "air" resonating throughout the opening lines, in a scene otherwise limned by claustrophobia, desperate breathing, fatigue, and languishment. In a debonair tale, it is as if the "one who has been long in city pent" might read the very air, the tale of good air, as if the

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medium for became *the object of* reading—and thereby vanished. And as the invisible medium becomes the invisible message, both offer a transformation of claustral suffering: the pain of difficult breathing is made a breathing prayer, fatigue the prerequisite to pleasure, languishment the companion of love, not illness. Here the unseen reading—the reading of invisible air—appears conditioned by a brightly lit and sensually pleasant world, away from mortal care and the constraints of the city.

Yet the proffered emotion, "more happy," hardly survives the rhetorical question that frames it. The closing sestet of the poem reverses this heavenly appeal and reveals even more powerfully the intense pathos of reading. For Keats this turn occurs in recalling in a new way the words on the page, the effort of reading, and holding on to them both in a fallen world. The day is done, the light is leaving the sky, and his protagonist returns to the city:

> Returning home at evening, with an ear
> Catching the notes of Philomel,—an eye
> Watching the sailing cloudlet's bright career,
> He mourns that day so soon has glided by:
> E'en like the passage of an angel's tear
> That falls through the clear ether silently.

The color that marked the opening sestet, Keats's favorite blue, has been drained from the firmament: this scene is done in dark and white, bright and clear. In one way, the clarity of high contrast offers perfect conditions for reading. And indeed, the poem now presents three overlaid and externalized passages to be read: the cloudlet's bright career passing across the sky, the mourned passing of the day, and the passage of an angel's tear.

What is extraordinary here is not simply the demonstrable virtuosity of writing—so that the sky writing scanned by the watching eye becomes a layering of puns and similes reflecting a writer's "bright career" and makes the day itself participate in that career. What's also extraordinary is the way in which Keats's protagonist, having quit the city for an idyll of perfect reading conditions, now leaves that idyll for a starker form of reading. Notice that he has, in these closing lines that return him to the city, left the realm of romance, color, texture. The rich sensory experience equated in the accompanying sonnets with the virtual reality of reading lingers now only in the dark notes of Philomel's song. Notice too that as he scans these closing passages, he reverses the customary codes of legibility: the reader in the poem ends by looking upward at white figures written across a darkened background. He is reading in the dark, or perhaps reading the negative of reading, reading pathetically: "straining," as Keats puts it in a letter to George and Georgiana, "at particles of light in a great darkness" (*Letters* 80).[20] Notice too that the figures themselves are moving, sailing or falling—as unfixed as the alexic man's Cyrillic or Korean. These figures are hieroglyphics written in light, passages asking to be read but unreadable (perhaps we are to imagine in that second-to-last line the track of a falling star, if not intimations of "photography," or light writing). These figures are also, of course, written finally in water.[21] How then to read the moving figure of an angel's tear, which replaces the beaming face of heaven as well as the burning lamps of the previous sonnet? The sonnet offers a fleeting, beautiful transcription of pathos—a recognition of loss and pain that travels from the immortal back to the mortal and that is legible now because of darkness, in circumstances where one can hardly read or read hardly. We come to the conditions of possibility for reading, the very event of reading, with new eyes.

For Keats, the pathos of reading underwrites his early verse, so that even as he offers poetic imagery, he calls us back to the matter of letters on a page, and those letters become images of the very contingency of mortal vision: operations of what can and cannot be seen, what is given and what is lost.

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Notes

1. Media theorists understand these as the residual operations of our alphabetized selves; see Rotman.

2. For the purposes of this article, and especially since it deals with some examples that predate the technology, I want to distinguish reading print or handwritten texts from reading Braille and reading by human beings from the scanning of machines.

3. Turner advocates greater attention to cognitive studies of reading.

4. Recall, for instance, Othello's jealousy and how it seizes on the handkerchief to establish the meaning of his emotion.

5. The alexic man could also write, Sacks explains, but could not read his own handwriting (56).

6. Sacks's preface to *The Mind's Eye* hardly clarifies: "Typically . . . my case histories start with an encounter, a letter, a knock on the door—it is the patients' description of their experience that stimulates . . . exploration." Then: "In my clinical notes I do my best to record what is happening to them and to reflect on their experience" (x).

7. Benjamin has extracted this passage from Bourget 2: 191–92. And Bourget employs the technique of free indirect discourse, blurring the first- and third-person perspective. My thanks to Tobias Menely for pointing out this passage to me.

8. This scene seems to echo but invert the terms Susan Sontag uses to characterize Benjamin's style. For her, each Benjaminian sentence "had to say everything, before the inward gaze of total concentration dissolved the subject before his eyes" (129).

9. Even though Sebald's novel is studded with photographs, presumably those taken by Austerlitz, most are out of focus and blurred, and all are black and white.

10. The last phrase comes from the publisher's description on the back cover of the novel.

11. The last meeting between Austerlitz and the narrator takes place in Paris, on the boulevard Auguste Blanqui—the revolutionary leader whose face was, according to Benjamin, "engraved" on Baudelaire's mind (6).

12. Compare with Terada, *Looking Away*, especially 1–33, where the demand comes not from reading and writing but from empirical reality, the facticity of the given world.

13. Batchen locates the "emergence of new media" around 1800 in the early experiments with photography, binary systems of information, and telegraphy. "[E]ach of these multi-media developments," Batchen writes, "shares a desire to automate the act of representation and to thereby displace the human body from an active to a passive role" (34). Kittler dates the change later, around 1880: "[Man's] essence escapes into apparatuses. Machines take over functions of the central nervous system, and no longer, as in times past, merely those of the muscles. The physiology of eyes, ears, and brains have to become objects of scientific research" (16).

14. Letter to Reynolds, Sept. 1819, describing the genesis of "To Autumn" (*Letters* 167); letter to Fanny Brawne, 16 Aug. 1819 (*Letters* 140); letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 Feb.–3 May 1819 (*Letters* 102). In *Modernity's Mist*, Emily Rohrbach reads Keats's mist similarly as the condition of being "inextricably embedded in uncertainty" and thereby "a resource for the imagination" (5, 6).

15. See Menely on Cowper's attentiveness to atmospheric conditions.

16. Lockhart's characterization of Hunt's poetry is easily transferred to the young Keats: "He raves perpetually about 'green fields,' 'jaunty streams,' and 'o'er-arching leafiness,' exactly as a Cheapside shop-keeper does about the beauties of his box on the Camberwell Road" (39).

17. The dimness that defines Endymion forecasts a starkly modern picture of environmental ruin:

> Away I wander'd—all the pleasant hues
> Of heaven and earth had faded: deepest shade
> Were deepest dungeon; heaths and sunny glades
> Were full of pestilent light; our taintless rills
> Seem'd sooty, and o'erspread with upturn'd gills
> Of dying fish; the vermeil rose had blown
> Its frightful scarlet. . . . (164; lines 691–97)

18. In its final sestet, the sonnet explains that it celebrates Tom's birthday. The brothers' search for condolence is haunted by knowledge of Tom's tuberculosis and George's plans to emigrate to America.

19. Jeffrey Cox explains that Keats composed the sonnet in October 1816 as he walked home from the house of his former teacher, Charles Cowden Clark, where he had spent the night reading Chapman's translation of the *Odyssey* (Keats, *Keats's Poetry* 54n1).

20. Having white letters on a black page can aid reading for those with low vision.

21. Keats asked that his tombstone read, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." For an excellent discussion of this famous line, see Plumly 61–78.

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