Introduction

Reading Spaces

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Still Reading

WE ARE STILL READING, A FACT THAT REGISTERS BOTH THE CHALlenging nature of our task and its rewards. Reading, rereading, and summoning earlier readings from our memories, notes, and bookshelves, as coordinators of this special topic for *PMLA* we have been responding to writings that map out—in their works-cited lists, endnotes, and arguments—an immense web of textual relations. Adding to the dictum that tells us that writing, as "a significance-scattering process" (Johnson, "Writing" 40), is interminable, we have found that reading is interminable. Again and again, we have found ourselves sent from one text to another and still another.

As science brings us closer to the mysterious and intricate processes involved in this seemingly simple and natural human activity, we are better able to peer into the reading brain. There too it appears that reading is interminable. Neuroscientists have argued that we are captives, as it were, of the "Letterbox" that has grown in our brains and that facilitates almost instant responses to written signs—though this effortless, naturalized competence is only available to those who are able to read fluently (Dehaene 65–72). Unreading is not possible after we have learned to make the leap from word to sense. Barring accidents leading to alexia, when faced with familiar letters we are always pulled into working out their meaning(s).[1]

As recent investigations into how we read demonstrate, scientists are increasingly able to track how the human eye decodes written words—in and out of focus, skipping many signs, and still subliminally vocalizing sounds (Ender and Lawrence). Reading these pages, you are seamlessly processing words across several layers: making sense of the words' graphic features while comprehending the text

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cognitively as well as somatically. What takes place at that crossing point between words on a page and the mind that elucidates them—as we move from an optical to a semantic apprehension of these written signs—has been debated across history, of course. This issue brings into view what Tristram Wolff calls the new "ecology of knowing," in which cognition, emotion, and a close attention to language as a system or a synaesthetic experience stand out as the objects of such investigations. A humanist approach to reading as embodied process, revealed, for example, in the articles of Andrew M. Stauffer or Wolff, enriches the research undertaken in laboratories and offers distinctive empirical and phenomenological evidence for how we read.

In attending to the process of reading with all the sophistication they owe to their literary training, these scholars do more than elucidate the intricacies of reading ("the nuts and bolts of the processes that the mind coordinates in order to comprehend" [Elfenbein 13]); they invite radically new practices of reading. And, as they analyze readers' tears or readers' sentiments, they stake a claim for aesthetic experience and beyond, for humanist approaches in a unique space—a space inaccessible to science.

Meanwhile, the recent history of our own academic reading culture reveals other features on the map of our field. For more than a decade, we have been moving away from the imperatives of interpretation and critique (Best and Marcus; Felski), and there are rich pragmatic as well as ethical implications to the new perspectives opened by scholarship that focuses on the mechanics of reading and on the cognitive processes that the act of reading involves. Some of the same scholars who have insisted most forcefully that literary critics do not have a monopoly on *r* , insofar as the term is synonymous with an act of interpretation, are also those who call on their colleagues to attend more closely to the intricacies concealed by the simple term *t* *c* . Arguing that the activity of reading should be positioned in a broader cognitive perspective, these scholars have also asked why over the last fifty years the discipline of literary studies has tended to leave the exploration of those intricacies to other disciplines such as psychology or education.

As coordinators of this special topic we were struck by the emphasis our contributors place on the agency of readers and by their efforts to trace the tremendous diversity of material forms that can be read: the most remarkable feature of the new landscape mapped out by recent scholarship on reading may be scholars' evident interest in broadening the range of textual objects available for study. In the pages that follow, a range of material—card catalogs, works of visual art, and the sometimes barely legible pencil marks deposited in the margins of printed poems by readers who want to recall in the future their present scene of reading—receive attention as reading matter and as objects of scholarly inquiry. This redirection of attention both transforms reading practices and defines new communities. It also brings into view new spaces for reading.

Reading—as James A. W. Heffernan defines it in his article—becomes an activity we pursue in art galleries as well as in studies and libraries. Other authors in this issue take a different approach as they redescribe the settings in which reading happens—namely, in a universe of "books without borders" (Fraser and Hammond) and of novels that are "born translated" (Walkowitz). A reemerging concept of world literature and new emphases on traveling texts have thus raised new questions about the location of literature. The contributors we invited to participate in our Theories and Methodologies section, "New Geographies of Reading," illuminate in new ways the language of space we customarily summon to think about texts' reception. For instance, under conditions in which literature is geographically dispersed, consumed by

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readers who are distant both literally and figuratively from the audience originally imagined by the author, what kind of response can or will count as close reading?

And though Michel de Montaigne's portrait in the *Essays* of 1580 of himself as a solitary reader ensconced in his library, reflecting on and with his books, retains much charisma, the essays in this issue link reading to activist ends—the ends pursued by those librarians committed to a subversive project of countercataloging, discussed in the essays by Laura E. Helton and J. Daniel Elam, or the ends pursued by climate activists who write novels that, as Michaela Bronstein traces here, conscientiously take pains to remind us of the environmental impact of our novel reading. Perhaps, then, we risked misleading readers of this issue of *PMLA* when we began this introduction by asserting reading's interminability. We might instead have reminded you of a statement that Jean-Luc Nancy made more than a decade ago, in *On the Commerce of Thinking*: "In fact reading does not lead to more reading, but to everything else, to what is sometimes called action and sometimes experience where we rub against the illegible real" (41–42).

On Libraries and Bookshelves

"Could one be a revolutionary and still love the library?" asked Simon Gikandi, the former editor of *PMLA*, in 2013 (11). The variety of guises in which libraries appear in this volume suggests the trickiness of the question: Niccolò Machiavelli's library, as Martin Eisner reminds us, is a very different sort of collection of books, mandating a very different comportment by its user, than the decolonized library imagined by S. R. Ranganathan, the early-twentieth-century Indian librarian studied by Elam.

In her article "Climate Change and the Readers of the Future," Bronstein charts a path into a future for writing and reading that, on a threatened planet with diminishing resources, seems very fragile. She begins with an account of a creative project called *Future Library*, launched in 2014 in Norway, that involves the creation of a series of time capsules, each one conserving a novel, which over the next century will build up "an anthology of books"—provided, that is, that there are still readers a century from now to find that anthology. Even more challenging is the rule that specifies that these new creations will be released to the public only after "the century is over and the trees of the forest," which were planted at the inception of the project, "can provide the paper on which the works will be printed."

The works, now withheld from the public, are kept by the Oslo Public Library; among them are the novels that *Future Library* commissioned from David Mitchell and Margaret Atwood, which the authors wrote under the darkening cloud of climate change. With the growth of a new genre—climate fiction—a new literary landscape emerges that reveals what Bronstein names "a cannibalism of time" caused by our reading habits and materials: reading uses up resources too. Can we preserve our culture at the cost of our environment? The apocalyptic overtones of many works in this genre are of worldwide significance, but they are also addressed directly to our profession. Whether as consumers of wood-pulp paper or of the electricity that powers our e-book readers and laptop computers, we use natural resources for our craft. Can we protect lives on this planet while also preserving books and the long chain of reading and writing embedded for good (as well as for bad) in our history?

As revealed in Helton's "On Decimals, Catalogs, and Racial Imaginaries of Reading," such dark forebodings may find their hopeful counterpart in the work of preservation that started in a library near Washington, DC, in the 1930s. Entrusted with a collection of "Negroana" (namely, the materials of the

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Moorland Foundation at Howard University), Dorothy Porter, a librarian and curator, started devising new models for classification and a carefully constructed system of call numbers that could give access to an untapped archive. With index cards as her material and while networking with others (which in her day meant relying on letters, phone calls, and visitors), she elaborated a library system capable of giving readers throughout the world access to what until then were fallow lands for researchers. Librarians are the key sponsors of literacy (Brandt 19). However, thanks to Helton we are forcefully reminded not only that in order to read a book you have to know it exists but also that you will benefit immeasurably from its being surrounded by others like it. This simple but powerful idea formed the foundation of Porter's groundbreaking mission. Retrieving a culture in all its diversity requires, in Barbara Johnson's formula, establishing "a difference within" (*Critical Difference* 4), which is what Porter produced with every new index card and subject category. Porter not only carved out a new field—she also initiated a redistribution of knowledge and power under a universalizing ethos of concrete access and representation.

In the wake of an archival and pedagogical project undertaken in a large research library, Stauffer, in "An Image in Lava," tells us that poetic language offers "a way out of the yearning self's mute prison." Dealing with texts, inscriptions, and the marginalia hidden in books on rarely visited shelves prompts an evocative image. "Fragment[s] of grief," he tells us, are buried in Felicia Hemans's books. The volumes reveal a treasure trove of words not merely printed but also inscribed by readers' hands, which serve as mementos of other lives and private worlds. Revisiting a lyrical voice interlaced with the traces left by readers creates "a layered scene of identification and sentiment." These encounters with textual annotations and inscriptions do more, however, than widen a space of empathetic, romantic identification: they create an affective disruption that, as in Hemans's poem occasioned by the excavations in Herculaneum, "The Image in Lava," offers piercing evidence of the pathos of untimely death or of losses yet to be mourned. Meanwhile, the printed text marked with handwritten traces reverberates across time and suffuses these scholarly, readerly experiences with what is best defined as an aura. The lyric form opens up a space for mourning and melancholia that extends beyond the archive and looks back at us, readers in the present.

What will be the future of our reading, Stauffer asks, as academic libraries are increasingly reconfigured "as distributed networks rather than copy-specific collections"? Will this transformation bring an end to certain ways of reading—those that are more likely to move us and illuminate our worlds? Could it be then that the intellectual and affective resonances of reading that define literary experiences are even more dependent than previously thought on a physical, material medium of transmission?

The culture of reading of the members of the Henry Williamson Society, studied by the anthropologist Adam Reed, is highly localized, in both a sociological and geographic sense. His essay carries an implicit reminder that the values ascribed to books admired for their artistry may reflect what, to the outsider, might look like the idiosyncratic reading practices of a subculture. The community of readers he visited lives in the south of England, studies the complete works of their favorite author, and is steeped in his biography. What makes this culture distinctive and validates it is that it thrives on forms of "authorial possession" that "enraptured solitary reading" can induce.

In a propitious encounter with Alex Woloch's groundbreaking work on the role of minor characters (the critic explores it as the "dynamic flux of attention and neglect" [2]), Reed opens up a fascinating space for re-

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flections on the strange, seemingly irrational bonds we create with fictive people. The thinner the characterization, the greater the affective investment: here fiction propels readers into worlds they can inhabit, worlds that help them make sense of their existence as they "find themselves" or find validation for their identities in the reflective mirrors provided by Williamson's minor characters. Drawing on Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art, Reed mobilizes his notion of dispersed agency. For Gell, the work of art exerts its own agentic "influence," in this case on the souls and spirits of readers who are susceptible to "the forces that register an impression in the vicinity of the art-object."

However, Reed's patient fieldwork yields results that go far beyond the descriptions and models invoked above. It invites a reexamination of questions that have been glossed over in the history of reading, as well as in the recent frameworks borrowed from Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. One is the magical, quasi-animistic aspect of our attachment to and beliefs about characters in novels. The other can best be described as revisiting the gradual shift toward silent reading that began centuries ago. Reading silently, "the reader ha[s] time to consider and reconsider the precious words whose sounds . . . could echo just as well within or without," Alberto Manguel writes (51).

Silent reading gradually caught on, to the point that we now take it for granted. When we ask our students to do their reading, we naturally expect them to do so silently, though noting how many of them rely on earbuds as a protective screen against noises or voices. Full absorption in silent reading began, long ago, to people our interiorities in new ways. What if, after all, spirits may be doing their impish work as we lose ourselves in books?

Translations

The shorter essays collected in "New Geographies of Reading" examine the transformative role played by book cultures as they spread across new spaces and new territories. The book remains an instrument of meaningful cultural transfer even now. Its material availability—in parchment, vellum, or just paper, and sewn, bound, glued, or printed on demand—in the past just as today has enabled its dissemination across an increasingly literate world despite pockets of religious or political resistance. However, the contributors to this section complicate older critical accounts in which books' travels across political and linguistic borders are treated as evidence of cultural homogenization. They redescribe translation as a force of dispersal, not an act of communication in which fidelity to a model is crucial.

Reading communities across a global world have taken ownership of bookish culture as a force of emancipation. From the discrete and only partly successful life-changing experiences of a solitary Chinese reader (Wang He and Wen Jin) to Franz Kafka's attempts to understand Yiddish as a way of "speaking Jewish" (Samuel J. Spinner) to the "utopias of learning" analyzed by Hansun Hsiung, this cluster places on our map highly localized acts of reading. In studying the dissemination of Frantz Fanon's political thought through the medium of radio and storytelling, Michael Allan suggests that inventive, appropriative, and locally readjusted practices of reading through other media amount to a new "phenomenology of reception" as determined by linguistic and cultural contexts. In Latin America (William G. Acree, Jr.), behind the Iron Curtain (Roar Lishaugen and Jiřina Šmejkalová), in a global market provided by a seemingly "borderless" access to books (B. Venkat Mani), or in an attempt to reinvent the library as a means of postcolonial emancipation (Elam), we discover a paradigm for the study of reading that no longer obeys a logic of otherness and difference and is, on the contrary, inherently polycentric and dispersed and that resonates with local cultural habits and forces.

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Literacy entails empowerment, and what reading can mean for emancipation, for indoctrination, for one's intellectual formation or *Bildung*, or as an appropriation of foreign models is up for grabs worldwide. Meanwhile, the volatile nature of our textual objects raises, as Emily Apter discusses, problems of translation that can have devastating existential consequences. The notion of "untranslatables" brings to the fore differences among languages that seem intertwined with a philosophical history and with the advancement of thought enabled by philology: in practice, the impossibility of translation exerts its force in concrete terms.

Aesthetic Spaces

Beyond examining differences in vocabularies in scholarly and historical contexts, three contributors carve out a space that tells us about "reading [as] a complex practice, rather than a simple act" (Warner 21). Each also invokes the notion of poetry, Eisner in offering "a poetic approach to politics," Wolff in establishing a genealogy of a mode of reading that "resented [the] magical powers" of "the poetry of speech," and Heffernan in reflecting on an aesthetics and a literary epistemology anchored in the ancient maxim *ut pictura poesis*, which helps him identify a crucial distinction between our experiences of image and of text.

In "Machiavelli in Paradise," Eisner gives us a rich case study of *The Prince*, often taught as a text of political rhetoric. Against this backdrop, and relying on extensive research into the sources that inspired Machiavelli's activities as a writer, Eisner documents how eclectic readings in classical literature as well as in the vernacular (Dante and Petrarch) undergird Machiavelli's style and provide inspiration for his political works. The authors from the past with whom Machiavelli communes in his reading are the wellsprings of an inspiration that the seriousness of the term "great ancients" belies. In parsing this author's reading list, Eisner not only reveals the degree to which the ancients, as well as the moderns of Renaissance humanism, nourished the author's thoughts. He also shows how images and ideas found in amatory literature invite us, Machiavelli's modern readers, to see beyond the political scene of instruction that his book emblematizes and to acknowledge those other scenes of reading, private and often wayward, in which we read just for pleasure.

Wolff's extended inquiry into how academics read is driven by a need to revise a number of received ideas about close reading that were fostered by practical criticism in England and by the New Criticism in the United States. Beginning with a survey of the many descriptive epithets that have been applied in recent years to the act of reading, Wolff analyzes various attempts, from Jeremy Bentham's onward, to systematize and simplify reading for pragmatic, social, and pedagogical purposes.[2] Wolff warns us about the sacrifice incurred in the name of such simplifications, for instance in C. K. Ogden's project to create a minimal English vocabulary that would, like Esperanto, simplify communication.

In Wolff's analysis, a history of logical positivism and utilitarian principles applied to the act of reading makes short shrift of the emotivism that is integral to the literary experience. From the moment words are weighted with affects and attachments, such notions as "information and excitation" seem only remotely connected to actual experiences of reading. Our experiences with texts are interactive and shared with others, while the words we read are endowed with intangible qualities they owe to our social existence. Even as scholars of reading, we are always already part of a force field of invisible influences that inflect our rhetoric and the very structure of our discourse. Wolff invites us to reconsider our reading practices in the light of the rich genealogy provided by Kenneth Burke that makes a literary text the

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medium of ceaseless interactions of social and psychic affects.

Words and worlds, norms and desires: Eisner and Wolff tell us that literature opens up a space between structures and our intentionally driven relations to texts—a space in which words gain agency. They involve us in a dance or in forms of pleasure and play that, however surreptitiously, pull us into the intersubjective and creative spaces that exist between them—we cross the threshold between signifier and signified and respond to the symbols scattered on pages.[3] What are then some of the steps we take in this dance? And, more important perhaps for an understanding of a culture that now as earlier is powerfully drawn to the material and immanent aspects of reading, why does Burke's metaphor of "dancing" seem so resonant for us still? Perhaps it resonates because it is so carefully poised to elicit the ineffable experience of being both contained (or constrained) by concrete social and physical realities while acknowledging the freedom found in aesthetic experience.[4]

In "Reading Pictures," Heffernan examines "the distinctive character of pictorial signs" as an entry point to a study of "the difference between reading texts and reading pictures" and begins by pointedly acknowledging that "words, pictures, and images deeply inform each other." Examining a rich tapestry of cases (which includes very recent instances of visual-conceptual art that relies on "lettering"), Heffernan takes us beyond the richly storied crossovers between poetry and painting into a more abstract field and addresses head-on what must be, for us, a pressing question. In an era increasingly vested in pictures, what is the difference, phenomenologically speaking, between how we read paintings and how we respond to texts?[5]

Culling the results of an extensive survey of the philosophies that address the intertwining of words and pictures in representations, he highlights the intertwining of writing and reading embedded in pictorial configurations that call for interpretation. Thus, the work of Nicolas Poussin, the famed "author," in the French classical age, of biblical, historical, and pastoral pictures, drives an analysis of images that, initially poised between visual and verbal meanings, ends up giving the upper hand to the written medium and to reading.

If, as we established earlier, reading begins with and aims at sense making, then it commands us, the interpreters of words inscribed on a surface, to dwell on their meanings. Abstract paintings do not entail such obligation; we can live with them in the absence of discernible figurations. This contribution opens up new avenues for a broader interrogation that bears on what reading communicates and does for us, its human subjects. What Heffernan tells us about the distinctive features and qualities of our encounters with verbal matter(s) enriches what to the best of our knowledge remains a puzzle, riddle, or mystery: How do we, or can we, cross the gap between the letter and what it signifies? At the same time, his work brings to the fore a more mundane question, which pertains to the epistemological, sociological, and even historiographical aspects of our field. It focuses on what is distinctive, globally and universally, to a culture, a *Bildung* that is nourished by words.[6]

There is a space where we lose sight of the book we are holding or the screen we are scanning and reach that sweet spot of oblivion of their existence; focusing on that transparent page sets us dreaming and prompts our minds to travel across time and across places. Hence Marcel Proust's early insistence that we embrace the space in between words to make of our reading a creative act—in which words open onto other worlds.[7] In a famous depiction of a child reading in a garden, Proust stages a lesson in reading and the freedom and pleasures it affords.[8] It tells us what it can feel like to read, and it makes of reading a way of appropriating the world to oneself. It

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invites us into a space that is at once poetic and aesthetic:

> On the sort of screen dappled with different states and impressions which my consciousness would simultaneously unfold while I was reading, and which ranged from the most deeply hidden aspirations of my being to the wholly external view of the horizon spread before my eyes at the bottom of the garden, what was my primary, *my innermost impulse . . . was my belief in the philosophic richness and beauty of the books I was reading, and my desire to appropriate them for myself, whatever the book might be.* (*Swann's Way* 115; our emphasis)

In the italicized passage, the visual and the semantic converge, but as always with a gap to be filled—a need for interpretation or just clarification. One might say, all too bluntly perhaps, that these words refer to a curiosity or a hunger for knowledge that reading satisfies. For the two of us, however, they bear the signature of a favorite author, George Eliot, much loved by Proust.

In our discussion of these essays we have often found ourselves harking back to *The Mill on the Floss*, a book that long ago helped each of us discover the pleasures of fiction and taught us that once you enter a world of bookishness, your hunger for the knowledge culled from bookshelves soon seems insatiable. Maggie Tulliver, Eliot's heroine, suffers from that hunger for knowledge, especially after her father's illness and her family's abrupt descent into poverty. She "wanted some key that would enable her to understand, and in understanding, endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart. . . . [I]f she had only books that she might learn for herself what wise men knew!" writes the narrator (379).

So we return to that particular scene of reading in the novel, one that foreshadows a fate that its author passionately shared when she invented Maggie. It features a young girl who, instead of attending to her stitching, pores over the magical words of a Latin grammar that belongs to her brother:

> She presently made up to skip the rules in the Syntax—the examples became so absorbing. These mysterious sentences snatched from an unknown context—like strange horns of beasts and leaves of unknown plants, brought from some far-off region, gave boundless scope to her imagination, and were all the more fascinating because they were in a peculiar tongue of their own, which she could learn to interpret. (217)

No matter how scarce the books, whether on a table, at a bedside, or in a mobile library, their words inspire those who have become even just a little bookish to broaden their dreams and perhaps even take on new responsibilities. This double impulsion maybe justifies our claim that reading must be interminable—as that which gives us a chance to envisage a better future—on a planetary scale. However, reading demands many diverse acts of translation, acts that involve more than characters on a page. It demands a way of conversing about and exchanging ideas that helps cross boundaries between various cultures of reading. Even explaining our own cultures of reading as members of the Modern Language Association sometimes demands feats of translation. We know how easily the bonds that reading promises can be broken or distorted and that often what separates one language or culture from another may seem insuperable. But what remains untranslatable is also what can lift the spirit, or what just propels us with due diligence to read more and even, perhaps, to read better.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Wolf 60–65; Dehaene 54–58. Dyslexia is probably the most studied condition that involves reading impairment; both Dehaene (esp. 243–46) and Wolf discuss it extensively. See also Savarese on autistic readers.

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2. Wolff's critique is all the more meaningful in the current educational context in the United States, where the aesthetic aspects of reading have lost considerable ground to pragmatically driven curricula, ostensibly inspired by the New Critics, that have streamlined and instrumentalized reading. See Ender and Lynch.

3. For a contemporary reflection on a literary performativity defined by reading, see Citton 35–37.

4. The philosopher Alva Noë has argued that through our somatic, embodied relation with the outside world—namely, with our consciousness—we are naturally attuned to aesthetic experiences (8, 125; see also Godzich 46). Guyer writes that Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Meditations on Poetry* is the first modern text to pick up the thread of Greek thought that saw in aesthetics a "science of perception."

5. Commenting on Hans Robert Jauss, Godzich develops a crucial distinction between two modalities of aesthetic experience as he revisits the difference between "Erfahrung" and "Erlebnis" (44–46).

6. See Redfield 46–49; Espagne 113–17.

7. Attention to the space in between words and its creative potential is the central theme of Proust's essay on Gérard de Nerval in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* ("Gérard de Nerval") and undergirds his conception of reading as writing in his preface to *Sesame and Lilies* ("On Reading"). For recent research on this topic, see Dehaene 88–93; Naccache, *Le nouvel* 101–19, *La chant* 11–43; Ender and Lawrence 205–06n20.

8. See de Man, whose essay refers to Georges Poulet (57) and Gérard Genette (60). His interpretations of such passages overlap with our themes.

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