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Different Ways of Reading, or Just Making the Right Noises?

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What does reading look like? Can learning to read be reduced to the acquisition of a set of isolable skills, or proficiency in reading be equated with the independence of the solitary, silent reader of prose fiction? These conceptions of reading and reading development, which figure strongly in educational policy, may appear to be simple common sense. But both ethnographic data and evidence from literary texts suggest that such paradigms offer, at most, a partial and ahistorical picture of reading. An important dimension, neglected in the dominant paradigms, is the irreducibly social quality of reading practices.

Keywords: reading; literacy; literature; social practice

Here in England we are being presented with a grossly reductive, technical-rationalist version of what reading is and how development in reading might be encouraged. The current government is proposing that all six-year-olds' progress as readers should be measured (Department for Education (DfE) 2010, 2011b). How this is to be accomplished is by presenting each child with a list of 40 words and non-words; to pass the test, the child must manage to make the correct sound in response to a least 34 of these. This marks the triumph of synthetic phonics as the one true path to literacy.¹ It is an approach which privileges grapho-phonetic correspondence not merely as a useful cueing system but rather as the only approved method; as the presence of the nonsense words in the test emphasises, it is an approach from which meaning has been evacuated. It is also an approach that, contrary to what has been argued by many sensitive and experienced observers of early reading (Minns 1997, for example), makes a sharp separation between learning to read and reading. Indeed, one aspect of this government-endorsed approach is that it tends to regard the activity of reading itself as entirely unproblematic, as an already-known, single and socially valorised practice. At the same time, the fact that learning to read is redefined as solely a question of learning to make the right noises means that it can shed no light on the activity of reading itself, since in most contexts reading would seem to involve some sort of engagement with meaning.

So what does reading look like?

The dominant paradigm of reading is vividly represented in the opening scene of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). We first meet the 10-year-old Jane as she escapes from the obnoxious Mrs Reed and her equally obnoxious three children by hiding in a window seat, where she settles down to read Bewick's *A History of British Birds* (1797/1847). What is paradigmatic about this moment is Jane's solitariness, her

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absorption in the world of the book and the extent to which her communion with the book is a means of escaping from the unpleasant reality of the world around her into the richer, more satisfying realm of her own imagination. Jane's reading *within* the novel is paralleled in Virginia Woolf's reading *of* the novel 80 years later:

So intense is our absorption that if someone moves in the room the movement seems to take place not there but up in Yorkshire. The writer has us by the hand, forces us along her road, makes us see what she sees, never leaves us for a moment or allows us to forget her. At the end we are steeped through and through with the genius, the vehemence, the indignation of Charlotte Brontë. (1925, 155)

Woolf's use of the first person plural to describe the reading experience enforces the sense that the experience is generalisable – that it is, indeed, the experience of the 'common reader', common to all (proficient) readers. We, Woolf insists, are lost in the world of the book, willingly surrendering ourselves to the 'genius' of the authorial consciousness.

This conception of what it is to read, and of the rewards that are attendant on such ways of reading, particularly when the object of such reading is a literary text, have come to seem mere common sense. This common sense is firmly embedded in policy. The English National Curriculum, for example, presents the development of competence in reading as a movement towards greater independence, greater ability to cope unaided with more demanding texts:

Reading: during Key Stage 2 pupils read enthusiastically a range of materials and use their knowledge of words, sentences and texts to understand and respond to the meaning. They increase their ability to read challenging and lengthy texts *independently*. (DfE 2011a, 8, emphasis added)²

One might want to remark, in passing, on the curiously limited perspective on the resources that readers might employ: the implication here is that what counts is knowledge of the word, but not of the world. There is also an assumption here that meaning is in the text: the reader's role is merely to 'understand and respond' to this already-existing meaning. (There may be a parallel here with the premise of synthetic phonics – that the sounds are somehow *there* in the letters, waiting to be correctly identified, and voiced, by the reader.)

We will return to Jane Eyre and her reading habits. Before we do so, though, I want to suggest that the dominant assumptions about reading are far from universally applicable; on the contrary, they are the product of a particular history – and a fairly recent one at that.

What reading was – how reading was understood – in other periods and societies helps to illuminate the specific and partial nature of our society's assumptions about reading. Thus, for example, as Daniel Boyarin has argued, 'Reading in ancient Jewish culture signifies an act which is oral, social and collective' (1993, 11). Boyarin cites the biblical description of reading in *II Kings* 22, where the scribe reads the Torah aloud in the presence of the king and the king is then said to have read the scroll. He goes on to argue that, within the Hebrew culture of the biblical and Talmudic periods:

there was simply no word in that language at all which meant what we mean by 'reading a book', that is, the essentially private, individual consumption of narrative with the effect of and for the purpose of 'pleasure'. (18)

Similarly, Howe (1993) presents a view of reading within Anglo-Saxon society as an inescapably social practice. On the Old English words *raed* and *raedan*, Howe points out that 'these words and their cognate forms in other Indo-European languages first denoted the act of giving counsel through speech' (1993: 60; see also Stock 1983, 1990). He describes the 'medieval textual community' as:

...a group bound together by the reading aloud of texts to listeners for the purpose of interpretation. In a culture unaccustomed to the written text, the act of reading would have seemed remarkably like solving a riddle. For it meant translating meaningless but somehow magical squiggles on a leaf of vellum into significant discourse... (Howe 1993, 62–3)

Overlapping but nonetheless distinguishable from the concept of what counts as proper reading is the issue of who counts as a proper reader. In the Renaissance, argues Kevin Sharpe, the relation of text to reader was determined by the power relationship existing between writers and their patrons:

Patronage, for example, the tradition not only of dedicating to patrons but writing as if for them primarily, implicitly placed the reader in a position of greater authority (as he or she usually was) than the author. The dedicatee not only provided the livelihood that was the most basic precondition of writing, but also facilitated publication, authorised the work and at times used influence to bypass the censor. The patronage system placed the reader, chronologically and hierarchically, before the author of the text; and arguably the decline of aristocratic patronage was necessary for the emerging prominence of the author by the early eighteenth century. (2000, 40)

Central to Sharpe's argument is the historically specific, autonomous position of Renaissance readers (or at least some readers, given that patrons and readers were not coterminous groups). For him the Protestant reformation entails a reconfiguration of the reader:

Experience, not least the bitter quarrels over the interpretation of biblical passages during the English reformation, had instructed that, like it or not, textual meaning was not absolute, that individuals read – and even chose to read – differently. (Sharpe 2000, 42)

And yet Sharpe accepts as unproblematic the common-sense notion that reading occurs, as it were, in the communion of the individual reader with the text; that it is, necessarily, an individual act rather than a group activity. Sharpe's perspective on reading from the Renaissance on might be regarded as the mainstream one. In this version, some combination of the printing press, the Protestant Reformation and the development of capitalism led to the privatisation of reading and the construction of the individual bourgeois reader for whom the novel was to be the perfect form (see, for example, Watt 1957/1979; Eisenstein 1983; Olson 1994; Baron 2000). Such assumptions are open to challenge. They run counter to Robert Darnton's claim that 'for the common people in early modern Europe, reading was a social activity. It took place in workshops, barns and taverns. It was almost always oral' (1991/2001, 166).

Darnton's more ecumenical definition of reading allows him to make connections between early modern practices and contemporary ones:

In the nineteenth century groups of artisans, especially cigar makers and tailors, took turns reading or hired a reader to keep themselves entertained while they worked. Even today many people get their news by being read to by a telecaster. Television may be less of a break with the past than is generally assumed. In any case, for most people throughout most of history, books had audiences rather than readers. They were better heard than seen. (1991/2001, 168)

Just how inadequate the model of literacy as individual practice might be, for scholars as well as for the masses, is suggested by Adrian Johns' account of the epistemological issues that confronted Robert Boyle and his colleagues at the Royal Society in the late seventeenth century. As experimental philosophers, they were developing the notion of replicability that has become 'central to the authority of modern science' (Johns 1998, 44). One might have imagined, then, that the dissemination through print of their accounts of experiments would have achieved the repetition of the procedures described (and thus have furnished further proof of the original experiments' validity). This does not appear to have been the case:

Extensive social contact between practitioners was needed in order to reproduce cultural skills and settings in a new site. A skilled practitioner might even have to travel in person between the two locations in order for the attempted replication to succeed – or, for that matter, for it definitively to fail. It thus seems that nobody in 1660s Europe built an air-pump successfully by relying on Boyle's textual description of the engine. Some, we know, tried; all, we think, failed. (Johns 1998, 44)

What is at stake here is the issue of the autonomy or self-sufficiency of the written text. Informing this problem is the issue of the relationship between orality and literacy. The research of Howe and Johns, referred to above, stands in opposition to the notion, long associated with the work of Walter Ong (1982), that literacy in some sense displaces oracy – that societies are marked by, and hence organised through, communication in one mode or another. There is plenty of evidence – of the kind provided by Howe and Johns, as well as by whole traditions of ethnography³ – that this is simply not the case. Literacy does not supersede orality: new technologies, new modes and media, complicate the existing communicational landscape, allow new forms to develop alongside and in combination with older resources for meaning-making. And the meanings that are made, differently in different times and places, are made in the social, in people's interactions with each other.

At more or less the same time that Boyle and his colleagues were writing *and* talking to one another, John Milton was at work on a rather different kind of text. In the magnificent opening of Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, Milton positions himself combatively in relation to classical literary traditions and conventions:

Descend from heaven, Urania, by that name
If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine
Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,
Above the flight of Pegasean wing.
The meaning, not the name I call: for thou
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
Of old Olympus dwell'st, but heavenly born,

Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,
 Thou with eternal Wisdom didst converse,
 Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
 In presence of the almighty father, pleased
 With thy celestial song.
 (Milton 1674/1971, 356–7)

Milton simultaneously draws on Graeco-Roman classical traditions and rejects them. His Muse is named as Urania, and yet he is at pains to explain that this name is, in effect, provisional ('If rightly thou art called'), and that he certainly does not mean the same thing by this as might have been meant by classical poets. Here, as elsewhere, he uses both the forms of classical poetry and the web of allusions that the tradition has given him, but insists on a different – explicitly Christian – perspective. Milton's 'heavenly born' Urania is not to be confused with one of the nine muses who hung out 'on the top/Of old Olympus'.

But Milton also positions himself within a specific political (and deeply personal) history. As he moves to the terrestrial second half of his epic, he refers to the moment at which he is writing, to the defeat of the revolution of which he had been the foremost propagandist, to the threat of persecution that he faces, and also to his own blindness:

More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
 To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,
 On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;
 In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
 And solitude.
 (Milton 1674/1971, 358–9)

Milton's invocation of his muse is no mere imitation of a classical trope, and certainly no indication of a retreat, either literary or spiritual, from present realities; rather it is central to the political project of *Paradise Lost*, a project that insists on the intersection of the particular and the universal. In the lines quoted above, Milton offers an image of the writer as lonely seer – a model of writing and the writer which is powerfully embedded in western cultural assumptions about the nature of literary production – but then emphatically rejects this notion of the writer's isolation:

And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
 Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn
 Purples the east: still govern thou my song,
 Urania, and fit audience find, though few.
 (Milton 1674/1971, 359)

The significance of this is not that the poet is saved from loneliness by the visitations of his muse. What Milton insists on here is a direct link between the act of writing and the audience for whom he writes, while the terms in which he conceptualises both his poetry ('song') and his readership ('audience') simply do not entertain any absolute separation of oral and written language, nor do they imply a model of reading as private, solitary or individual. And if Urania is responsible both for the production of the epic and for its consumption – not only the source of inspiration but also charged with

the task of finding the ‘fit audience ... though few’ – this opening section of Book VII serves not only to reconstruct the project of the epic but also to indicate the attitudes and attributes expected of the audience. Milton is thus not only positioning himself but also constructing his readers. What he demands of them is not merely knowledge of classical literary tradition (the ‘old Olympus’), nor even a shared set of religious beliefs (Urania’s ‘celestial song’), but also a shared understanding of and orientation towards contemporary political experiences (these ‘evil days’).

For Milton, as for Boyle, reading becomes meaningful in the social, in interactions that are necessarily located in specific times and places.

I want to compare Milton’s construction of his readers with the reader who is constituted by Wordsworth in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. The comparison is not entirely arbitrary. Wordsworth, as Hazlitt observed, should be read in the context of the French Revolution: his poetry was ‘carried along with ... the revolutionary movement of [the] age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments’ (Hazlitt 1825). Throughout the Preface, Wordsworth is at pains to emphasise a radicalism that is simultaneously aesthetic and political. He announces that his work is ‘a selection of the real language of men’, and he defines himself, the poet, as ‘a man speaking to men’. As with Milton, there is no hint of subservience to a patron: the relationship of reader and writer is a democratic, egalitarian one. But what has changed, fundamentally, is the sense of how his work will be read, what the act of reading looks like:

I have one request to make of my Reader, which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others. How common is it to hear a person say, ‘I myself do not object to this style of composition or this or that expression, but to such and such classes of people it will appear mean or ludicrous.’ This mode of criticism so destructive of all sound unadulterated judgment is almost universal: I have therefore to request that the Reader would abide independently by his own feelings, and that if he finds himself affected he would not suffer such conjectures to interfere with his pleasure. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800, xli–xlii)

In little over a hundred years, the relation between text and reader has changed beyond recognition. Here, explicitly and unmistakably, the reader is configured as singular: sound judgements are made by individual readers, reading alone. When their views are influenced by others, this is a process of adulteration; when others’ opinions are considered, even when they become a matter of speculation, this impedes the proper process of judgement – and hence, presumably, of reading itself. The clear demand on the reader is to ‘abide independently by his own feelings’: response is located in the individual, and authentic responses, given the emphasis on ‘feelings’, are visceral rather than noetic.

What is presented here is a model of reading that is entirely compatible with what I described above as the dominant paradigm. Independence is prized as a primary attribute of the reader, and pleasure is both an appropriate purpose and a desirable outcome. For Milton, the question of value does not arise, at least not explicitly: what validates *Paradise Lost* is not, in any recognisable sense, a matter of literary quality – and that is the whole point of the dismissive rejection of ‘old Olympus’. For Wordsworth, on the other hand, what is being produced and offered to individual consumers – buyers as well as readers, indeed readers because they are buyers – has to assert its

value in the marketplace. This leads, inevitably, into a consideration of the criteria that should underpin the judgements of literary value:

From what has been said, and from a perusal of the Poems, the Reader will be able clearly to perceive the object which I have proposed to myself: he will determine how far I have attained this object; and, what is a much more important question, whether it be worth attaining; and upon the decision of these two questions will rest my claim to the approbation of the public. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800, xlv)

If the reader is to be discriminating, what is the basis of his discrimination? Wordsworth's answer to this shows an awareness of the contradictions entailed in his emphasis on the individuality of the reader, since if all readers are to judge what they read on the basis of their own feelings, without reference to the views of others, can any more objective criteria be adduced? Yes, says Wordsworth:

...for an *accurate* taste in Poetry and in all the other arts, as Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an *acquired* talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800, xlii–xliii)

In itself, then, the 'foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart' is not up to the job. For the reader to gain the capacity to judge, to discriminate, requires practice: taste is acquired by reading other texts, and in particular other texts that are themselves of high quality. The answer may beg other questions (who is to determine which other texts afford 'the best models of composition'?) but it is precisely the answer that lies behind the National Curriculum's attachment to 'reading a wide range of texts' and to the promulgation of a canon.

Wordsworth's model of development in reading is also echoed in the National Curriculum. If accurate judgement is to be acquired through long acquaintance with the best models:

This is mentioned not with so ridiculous a purpose as to prevent the most inexperienced Reader from judging for himself, (I have already said that I wish him to judge for himself;) but merely to temper the rashness of decision, and to suggest that if Poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous, and that in many cases it necessarily will be so. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800, xliii)

One can see in this a foreshadowing of the National Curriculum's prescription that, even within Key Stage 1, children should read texts and 'say why they like them or do not like them'. On the face of it, such a practice appears to cede to the reader the power of judgement: in the open market of texts, the reader-as-customer is king. Below the surface, though, lurks the question of taste. Some opinions are more valid than others. In emphasising the dangers of erroneous judgements, and the importance of the acquisition of (the right kind of) reading experience, Wordsworth foreshadows the paradigm of reading and reading development that has remained dominant for the past two centuries. As Ian Reid has argued, 'much Romantic literature was itself already articulating a quasi-pedagogical strategy and prefiguring the conditions for its own reading' (2004, 95). Reid draws specific attention to the abiding influence of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' in 'picturing children as full of innate brilliance which fades when they become socialized' (96). There are, thus,

in this Romantic version of what reading is and what it is for, the seeds of the Arnoldian project, in which literature (culture) is counterposed to material existence and in which the function of literature is the inculcation of value in the individual.

This view of the function of literature is also inseparable from issues of taste, of judgement or discrimination. Reading (literature) is the means whereby taste or judgement is acquired, and also how reading – and hence the reader – is to be assessed. Good readers, discriminating readers, are able to judge the value of a text, and are able to talk (and write) about a text in ways that demonstrate their worth by showing their knowledge of the text's worth. On current examination papers, questions that invite candidates to write about the success of a text and about how the writer has achieved particular effects are traceable back through Leavis and Arnold to Wordsworth. A jaundiced observer of this process might wonder if it, like synthetic phonics, might amount to little more than making the right noises, learning to gasp in awe and wonder at the canonical literature which Michael Gove (2010) describes as 'the best in the world ... every child's birthright'.

What might be suggested by the contrast between Milton and Wordsworth, and more generally by the recognition that reading has been done differently, and can be differently understood, is that it might be helpful to reconceptualise literacy not in terms of competency or ability but rather as 'a set of cultural practices that people engage in' (Resnick 1990/2000, 28).

For teachers, one of the problems that is posed by the Wordsworthian or Woolfian model of reading is that it does not have much connection with the reading that is accomplished in the classroom. Perhaps such reading, the reading enacted among school students and their teachers, might usefully be explored neither as a poor substitute nor as a preparation for something else (the independence of the solitary, private reader) but as a practice in its own right – or rather as an array of interwoven but markedly different practices.

This pluralist view of reading brings me back to Jane Eyre in her window seat. Despite what I suggested above, Jane's absorption in the world of the book is really rather different from the experience described by Virginia Woolf. Indeed, from the perspective of the devotees of synthetic phonics, what Jane is doing isn't really reading at all. The book that she is (not) reading, Bewick's *A History of British Birds*, is organised into short chapters, each dealing with a different species. Each chapter opens with a line drawing of the bird, followed by a couple of pages of print, devoted to the bird's physical appearance, habitat, feeding and mating habits, and so on. These drawings, precise, minutely observed and beautiful, marked a breakthrough in the technology of wood engraving, and hence in the dissemination of high quality images to a mass market.⁴ It is easy to see in Bewick's *Birds* the direct ancestry of Dorling Kindersley, the book as vehicle for a project of popular scientific education. But what interests Jane Eyre is not primarily the birds, either the images or the words. Wherever there is space at the end of a chapter, this space is filled with another engraving, and another kind of image entirely – categorically not the sort one would encounter in a Dorling Kindersley book. It is these vignettes that attract Jane's attention:

The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms.

The fiend pinning down the thief's pack behind him, I passed over quickly: it was an object of terror.

So was the black horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows.

Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings...

With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption, and that came too soon. (Brontë 1847/1948, 3)

Looking at the thief with the devil pinning his pack (Figure 1), one can quite see why Jane might have been drawn to it, yet reluctant to dwell on it.

Bewick's vignettes are hugely varied in tone and content, representing the everyday and the macabre, country cottages and corpses swinging from gibbets, with equal relish. Wordsworth was among Bewick's earliest and most emphatic admirers. He represented Bewick as someone whose skill rendered language superfluous and who was able to bring art to the masses:

Oh! now that the boxwood and graver were mine,
Of the Poet who lives on the banks of the Tyne,
Who has plied his rude tools with more fortunate toil
Than Reynolds e'er brought to his canvas and oil.
(Uglow 2006, 311)

The stanza appears in a manuscript version of 'The Two Thieves; or, the Last Stage of Avarice', one of the poems to appear in the second (1800) edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Something of the unresolved tensions in Wordsworth's own political and aesthetic position is evident in the contrast between this dismissive reference to Reynolds and the respect Wordsworth affords him in the Preface (quoted above):



Figure 1. Source: Bewick (1797/1847, 232).

Reynolds represents an attachment to aesthetic judgement, but also the social exclusivity that is attendant on, and enacted through, such regimes of value; Bewick represents popular art, a category to which Wordsworth aspired, at least in his more radical early years.

So is Jane reading, or just looking at pictures? Both, of course – the binary opposition is absurd. She makes meaning, follows her own interests, uses Bewick's vignettes as the rich semiotic resource that they are. The pity is not that she is failing to follow an approved course of systematic instruction in synthetic phonics, but that she has no one with whom to share her pleasure in reading. (When she shows Bewick's *Birds* to nasty John Reed, he throws the book at her. Literally.)

Virginia Woolf was more fortunate. At a much younger age, Bewick's *Birds* was a book she read with her father, sitting on his knee while they read the pictures together (Uglow 2006, 402). And that's also what reading looks like.

Notes

1. The status that is to be afforded to systematic synthetic phonics is reflected in the fact that it is to be included as essential pedagogic knowledge in the new *Teachers' Standards*, which will have statutory force from September 2012 (DfE 2012, 6). For an admirably clear statement of the problems posed by the government's approach, see Donnison (2012).
2. Similar emphases on independence in reading are to be found in curriculum policy documents across the globe. See, for example, *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education 1994, 31), the Singaporean *English Language Syllabus* (Ministry of Education, Singapore 2001, 7), the *Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* (Massachusetts Department of Education. 2001, 2) and the New South Wales *English K–6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies, New South Wales 2007, *passim*).
3. See, for example, Scribner and Cole (1981), Brice Heath (1983), and Goody (1987).
4. Jenny Uglow's (2006) biography of Thomas Bewick provides a fascinating account of these processes.

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