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... have you started reading, dear reader, or are you about to start?

When will you have (yes, it should always be said in the future anterior), when will you have started reading this, this very thing that you are reading at the moment?

Maybe you are not yet the one who is reading, or maybe it is already no longer exactly you; who knows, it is reading in you and you are listening to the one who, in you, reads.

To read, to read in the infinitive, without anyone, any individualized reader, yet being the subject of the verb, to read as though it were possible to conjugate the verb the way one does verbs that describe meteorological phenomena, saying *it is reading* the way one says *it is raining* or *it is snowing*. . . . Reading is murmuring, here, on the threshold of the text that awaits that you lend it your voice or maybe, rather, that you recognize as your own the barely audible voice that is fluttering in the gray zone where reading is already afoot, already underway, like a movement that you would catch as it flits by.

This gray zone of reading is what we are going to explore together. This zone where there is anticipation (and therefore delay), tension that pulls the voice in a particular direction (and in the opposite direction), loosening it, to use a phrase of Thomas Hobbes's to which we will lend an ear, *loosened*, that is, unbound,

detached from the text, because it is already ahead of the text or lingering behind.

You are reading, then.

You read *t h e s e l e t t e r s* , these words that rise in an intimate chant that only you can hear. We will be talking about that single or multiple voice; we will prick up our ears toward its enigma. Listen: it is not yours or mine, actually, nor his or hers. It is the barely vocalized voice of your silent reading. Perhaps it is the voice of the text reading (itself) silently within you: tacit reading (*lectio tacita*), as Isidore of Seville so nicely put it in his *Sententiae* (3,14-9).

You are still reading, you bind, you collect these letters and these words that your murmuring phrasing constantly transmutes into discourse. Until the moment — now? — when you lose the thread, you are distracted, attracted elsewhere.

Then you read without reading, thinking about something else. And that can go on for a long time, an entire page, before the moment comes to turn it

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and you wake up, and you suddenly realize that you were sliding over the surface of the words, that you were mumbling them without lending an ear to them, skimming over them while taking off at a tangent.

As you start again after the interruption, you have to admit that the charm has been broken, that you have to start over, maybe start over a little earlier, find a way to get back into the flow, into the reading movement that had been carrying you. It has a delicate power, it is powerfully fragile, the thread of that voice that flows through you and carries you off, but is at the breaking point at every moment. You find yourself, then, still reading—your eyes rove over the letters—while you are no longer reading—I don't know what you are thinking of, what you are dreaming of. . . .

We will try to capture and think these tangential moments in which you are behind or ahead of yourself. It is there—we can feel it—that the power of reading plays out. That is where you, reader, are caught, torn, stretched like an elastic at breaking point between the two extremes of reading, reading as a mechanical reproduction and reading as an unprecedented invention.



I have always loved sharing my readings—as you do, I suppose. Or to be more exact, I find it fascinating that they are *already* shared. Actually, it is not so much that I love talking about them (that can happen), but rather that I am terribly enthused when I discover the trace of other readers that has been deposited or imprinted on what I read. The marks are sometimes unassuming, like punctuation marks affixed by the one who read before me, who came through ahead of me. I remember, for example, with some emotion, the wonderful moment I spent leafing through books from Jacques Derrida's library that had recently been acquired by and moved to the Princeton University Library. On many pages were scattered a light line in the margin or the bare underlining of an expression:

cursive traces of a reading rhythm (*un phrasé lisant*), as it were, with its almost invisible scansions. And then elsewhere I would stumble on a word or a comment. Among those, this one remains memorable: in his French copy of Giorgio Agamben's *The Time That Remains*, in the margin next to the sentence that condemns deconstruction to being only a "blocked messianism" (*messianisme bloqué*), Derrida writes, "you unblock! / you're out of your mind!" (*tu débloques!*)."

In sum: I like books that are annotated, highlighted, or underlined, those I find in archives or those I borrow from libraries (I have to make an effort not to annotate them myself), sometimes covered — and then it can be truly irritating — in colored highlights or layers of accumulated glosses by students or scholars anxious to reduce the book to detachable passages. . . . (Once, the first time I was invited to talk on the radio about my writing, I was surprised to find that the journalist had opted for this radical and literal solution: of the bound volume of which I was so proud, all that remained were a few pages ripped out and placed on the table of the show, in an approximate order, like a game of snakes and ladders in which one could skip a few squares in order to get ahead. What was the point? To save time, I suppose. I was shocked, all the more so because my radio host at the time was the head of a monthly magazine called *Lire* [Reading]).

Now that I read a lot of texts in electronic format, I sometimes come across other traces of readings, new types of footprints: in one work that I bought in the Kindle format sold by Amazon — *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, an interesting study by Matthew Rubery of the talking book, its past history and its recent renewal — I came across a sentence (I cannot give a page reference because there is no stable pagination in ebooks) that caught my attention for obvious reasons: "Listening to books is one of the few forms of reading for which people apologize." Intrigued, intent on being able to return to it later, I was getting ready to highlight it (I have a whole palette available to do that) or maybe attach a comment bubble, a bit as though the sentence were to become a character in

a cartoon strip. And then I noticed that it was already discreetly underlined in blue, by a dotted line. I clicked on the line, and this information appeared: “4 other people have highlighted this part of the book.” My jaw dropped.

I don’t know what intrigues, or exasperates, or frightens, me most in this report, which comes from who knows where between the lines I am reading: the adjective “other,” which seems to imply, by anticipation, that I, too, am about to mark that same passage (but how do they know, and who are “they” anyway, I wonder, before pulling myself together and thinking that of course “they” cannot know, it’s just a manner of speaking . . .), or the number four, which, written as a numeral (“4”) seems to announce an open-ended incremental counting (4, 5, 6, 100, 200, 1,000 . . .), a counter, a reader meter. It feels as though there has been a short circuit, as though someone has preceded me, as though someone has taken my place as the one to whom the trace of past readings was addressed, be it without an explicit address, in silent and anonymous ways: this trace reaches me now through the mediation of a database in which it has already been analyzed, counted, interpreted. I think to myself, What? I am not the only one who has noticed that this passage is important? What? There are already four, excuse me, “4” others? And how many other others to come will pay particular attention to this same passage, given that the simple fact of knowing their number is probably enough to increase that number? Unless a disgusted reader opts for a sort of strike, avoiding reading the passages that are promoted in this way by a machine that reads and makes read, one that definitely seems more like a data-mining apparatus than the glosses and marginal annotations familiar from the history of manuscripts and printed books.

The internal monologue that bubbles up in me, simple and tempting, all the more tempting for being simple, is already whispering this to me: go back to good old paginated paper, to the *codex* that, after the rolls of antiquity (*volumen*), has reigned for centuries over the history of books. Do not be drawn in by digital sirens that call

out to you in order to enmesh you in the databases of networked reading—a sort of social network of reading—where you will end up as a dotted line and a number (maybe you will be the “5” that follows the “4”), a mere variable for content suggestion techniques that await us and preconfigure our reading horizons. But then, another voice crops up in me, among the many voices that accompany and inhabit me as I read; this one says that this discourse should itself be resisted. For—and this is a question that will weigh on us in the pages ahead—haven’t there always been machines and machinality in reading? Aren’t there always machines that read and make read (that make one read this way or that way, that is to say like the “others,” whoever they may be, and however numerous)? Weren’t there already such machines back in the furthest antiquity, already in reading out loud or in a whisper, publicly, semipublicly, or, as Isidore of Seville so nicely put it, tacitly, that is to say in taciturn or silent reading?

We will cross paths with many machines and machinelike figures in the history of reading, starting with a certain slave we will meet in Plato, all the way to contemporary ebooks, via the mega reading machine that Hobbes constructed in and as the *Leviathan*.



Yet, dear reader, I digress. I wanted to talk to you about voice, about that voice that is neither mine, nor yours, nor his or hers.

If this book is thus also about a certain division of reading (*part-age de la lecture*), that division is marked, as we will see, in the reading voice itself. For as I will repeatedly reiterate, that is where the power stakes inherent in the act of reading operate and also where they can be eluded.¹

However, regarding this tacit voice that reads in me, infinitively, I have sometimes wanted to talk about it with other readers, to share the experience of listening to it. On such occasions, I have often been told that they did not hear it. So, in doubt—was I hallucinating?—I started to investigate, to look for proof, for tangible evidence.

When I discovered that it has a name in the neuroscientific literature on the question, I felt I had found confirmation that the voice that I hear exists: in neuroscience, “subvocalization” designates the equivalent of the inner speech of silent reading, although this tacit vocality may not be constant (expert opinions diverge on that matter), and it would seem to diminish or even disappear when the rhythm of reading accelerates (when one skims, as we say, rapidly scanning a text).²

I do not mean, however, to appeal to experimental corroboration as though seeking to validate my hypothesis as a timeless fact of nature. Mine is, rather, a historical hypothesis: if there is vocalization even in silenced reading, that is because it is an interiorization of the reading aloud that prevailed, as we will see, for many centuries. And it is precisely by lending an ear to the situations of noisy reading, whether ancient or more recent, that we will be able to make out the stakes of the micropowers that operate in the reading activity as though they had been swallowed, so to speak, incorporated into our innermost beings. In other words, reading always involves vocalizing a text for someone who listens, lending one’s voice to the text while a listener lends it an ear, even when I am apparently reading alone. This does not mean to foreclose any possible metamorphoses of readers to come.

This is why I will consider that the reading that arises in me when I begin to read always already takes place in a scene that mobilizes *at least* three actors: as I read, *I* let myself be traversed by a voice that articulates itself for *you* even when it seems that *you* and *I* are one with this voice that speaks for us and within us. And if I am so attached to this minimal triangulation of reading (*my* voice carrying *his* or *hers* to *your* ear, whoever or whatever *we* are), it is because it would be impossible to understand anything about the violence of reading or about its imperious temporalities without taking into account these multiple actors that constitute its staging, however mute and deeply buried that may be.

Indeed, how can we give an account of the reading imperative

(“read!”) that will most interest us, insofar as its inflexible authority accompanies (or even precedes) reading as it moves ahead or opens a way forward? It is impossible to measure its impact, to hear its effects, without taking into consideration the fact that it resonates and diffracts in a little vocal theater, on the microscene of power that plays out in us when we read. That is where this command to read, which is always presupposed, operates; that is where it weaves and unweaves vocal tessituras. (It is presupposed even in its very negation — “don’t read!” — as Ulises Carrión, a Mexican conceptual artist, understood when, in 1973, he inscribed a diptych on two pieces of paper: “Dear reader. Don’t read.”)

In short, we will repeatedly encounter this categorical imperative (in Plato, and later in Sade and Kant, among others). We will see how reading voices intertwine around this injunction as forces composing a provisional equilibrium. Each time, this is precisely where, following de Certeau, what we can only call a *politics of reading* is negotiated.



On the subject of this imperious imperative that subtends a micropolitics of reading, let me here share my astonishment at a series of judicial rulings that I first mistook for jokes. It started with an article published in French translation in *Courrier international*, in July 2009, whose headline runs “Pire que la prison, la lecture” (Worse than prison, reading).²⁴ The article discussed “sentence[s] to read a book” that Turkish courts were said to have imposed since 2006. It described, for example, the case of Alparslan Yigit, who, “sentenced for drunkenness and disorder,” had had his two-week prison sentence “commuted to the obligation to read for an hour and half a day, under police surveillance.” Questioned by a local paper, the offender described a terrible ordeal. To the question “How did you feel the first time you walked into the library?” he answered, “At first, it was horrible. I had the impression I was being tortured and that all the

city's inhabitants were watching me and making fun of me." When asked whether he "really" read, he explains: "I started with a book about Turkish writers. I also read a biography of Atatürk. They were really big books. It took me a whole month to read them. Actually, I pretended, I just turned the pages. When I was told that the judge would quiz me on the content, I started reading in earnest. I would not wish that on anyone, not even my worst enemy."

Of course, I have no way of verifying this story. The only way of checking that this was not an inconsequential anecdote (or, worse, an invention) was to look for similar cases elsewhere, documented, if possible, in languages to which I have direct access. Since my fascinated surprise at poor Alparslan Yigit's story, I have found others. For example, in an article in the *Guardian* in 2017, I learned that a judge in the State of Virginia had condemned adolescents (who had vandalized some tombs, tagging them with swastikas and white supremacist slogans) to read thirty-five books by authors such as Alice Walker, Elie Wiesel, Toni Morrison, and Hannah Arendt.⁵ Indeed, the court considered that the perpetrators of these acts of vandalism were "not understanding the seriousness of what they had done." In 2016, the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* reported another story, this one involving a network of underage prostitution in Rome: one of the clients received a two-year prison sentence and, as reparations for the moral injury suffered by the fifteen-year-old prostitute, was condemned to buying thirty books for her.⁶

It is worth pausing for a moment over the terms of the sentencing by the Roman court on September 20, 2016. According to judge Paola Di Nicola, "compensating the victim with a sum of money would, paradoxically, imply that the accused continue to repeat, via payment, the same type of proprietary relations" as the one previously established with the young prostitute, namely, one based on "monetization" (*monetizzazione*). On the contrary, she continues, "the purchase of specific books, most of them written by women," not only "avoids the aforementioned risk," but also provides a way of "becoming aware of what Laura is worth" (the name

of the victim was modified in the documents made public), that is to say her “priceless . . . dignity.” The judge concludes that the victim, “deprived of the means of defending herself and of cultural alternatives, will be able, through her own positive and determined conduct, that is, reading, to appropriate these stories and analyses, to use them one day in order to unlock the possibility of expressing fully her own freedom and autonomy of thought and choice.” At the end of the sentencing is a list of the books that were imposed (these included Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *Histoire des femmes en Occident* [History of women in the West], edited by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, but also works by feminist philosophers such as *To Be Two* by Luce Irigaray).

What do they say, these judgments that are injunctions to read, either explicit (in the case of the vandals in the State of Virginia) or implicit (in the case of the young Roman prostitute)? Actually, despite the apparent bizarre character of the legal ruling that attracted the press’s attention, there is nothing too surprising in them. For what transpires in these various sentencing measures is simply the Enlightenment ideal as it keeps resonating from Kant to contemporary discourses on reading as liberation.

Kant, you will remember, defined the Enlightenment as the exit from a state of minority, tutelage, or of immaturity for which one is responsible. According to him, one of the conditions for escaping from this state is reading, or more precisely, the free exercise of public reason in a community of readers (what he called a “reading world” [*Leserwelt*]).⁷ This same Kantian idea resonates in UNESCO’s launching, in 2003, of a decade devoted to “Literacy as Freedom.” In the inaugural speech at the United Nations headquarters in New York, on February 13, 2003, Koïchiro Matsuura, the director-general, adopted eminently Kantian terms when he declared that access to reading “frees people from ignorance, incapacity, and exclusion,” that it is “indissolubly linked to the human rights agenda” and enables “the downtrodden [to] find their voice.”⁸

If learning to read and understanding what one reads are thus, for several reasons, a matter of voice, voice, as we will see, is far from a simple matter: beyond the triangulated division to which I have already alluded, the reading voice is constantly interwoven with this imperative — “read!” — that accompanies or precedes, it. Yet as we begin to see, this injunction is not only the expression of the radiant enlightenment of (self)-emancipation. Or rather, if it is, it is so only insofar as the latter also has a dark, obscure side. As we will see with Plato and Sade, reading can also be slavery.



The recent condemnations to read constitute a remarkable prosopopoeia, insofar as they attribute a voice, that of the judge, to the reading imperative. Indeed, it is as though this silent imperative, buried in my innermost being — so close to what Kant called “the voice of reason” — suddenly appeared on the noisy scene of a courtroom, where it takes shape, where it is empirically embodied.

These situations in which the tacit or taciturn scenography of reading becomes manifest have a lot to teach us. The hypovoices that subvocalize in me when I read are suddenly, so to speak, amplified, megaphoned, booming out in a life-sized theater in which I can listen to them and analyze their power games, the balance of powers. We will therefore travel back in time to reverse the development that, from Plato to Saint Augustine and beyond, led to the practice of silent reading: returning to an era when a slave might have read out loud for us as he obeyed an order to do so, we will watch the implicit unfold, we will see it literally become explicit. We will observe the micropolitics of reading in a magnified version that will fully illuminate them.

And this is why we will also lend an attentive ear to the innumerable reading imperatives (they sometimes appear in softened forms as a piece of advice, a wish . . .) that appear in so many prefaces or addresses to the readers that we are. Each time, from

Michel de Montaigne to Friedrich Nietzsche or the famous Baudelairean appeal to the “hypocrite reader” that I am, we find ourselves already included, already inscribed in a certain configuration within a force field that precedes us, that awaited us. We will also, however, auscultate the places where, at the very heart of reading, lurks a certain idleness of the reader, a nonreading or a not reading that has the air of a counterpower: it was insofar as eyes detach from a text and lift up toward prayer that the reading practices of mystics, for instance, were of interest to de Certeau, who saw in them the promise of a reading tending toward its absolute, on the verge of casting off from the page. And as we will see, Walter Benjamin was not far from suggesting that the most authentic relation or the most respectful relation to books might be that of the pure collector, who, rather than reading them or buying or selling them, simply lets them be as they are.

For reasons apparently far from Benjamin or de Certeau’s preoccupations, some have recently defended the idea that in the era of the globalization of literature, proper reading practice should necessarily accommodate a certain degree of nonreading as an inevitable, one might say arithmetical consequence of the sheer number of publications produced on this planet daily. The logic seems unimpeachable and it should be taken seriously: if, with Goethe, who was the first to speak of *Weltliteratur*, we call “world literature” the unprecedented plethora of texts that each legitimately warrant attention, how can we continue to justify the need for close reading of the same canonical passages, insist that they deserve to be constantly reread, or devote time to gloss them or listen to them, indefinitely? That was essentially Franco Moretti’s question when, in an article that became a classic, he makes the claim for distant reading: “We know how to read texts, now let’s learn how *not* to read them.”

By declaring that careful reading (what Anglophones call “close reading,” a practice close to French *explication de texte*) was dead or outdated and by advocating for a sort of indirect reading or a

reading that relies on other readings, rather than grappling with the text itself, Moretti acknowledges the infinite proliferation, the limitless increase in what there is — in what there *would be* — to read. Since it is impossible to read everything, let's delegate reading, let's read what others will have read for us, let's read by proxy and statistically, tracking occurrences, mapping tendencies, evolutions. This might be the only way to manage in the face of what Valéry, after Goethe, staged in his "*My Faust*," that is to say the relentless overproduction of writings, the textual overflow that leads to the fact that "inch by inch, century by century, [is raised] a monument of the UNREADABLE."¹⁰

Is our little vocal theater in which the micropowers operate and are undone not destined to explode, to be pulverized, by the inordinate onslaught of everything that one should read? Given its globalized economy and ecology, isn't there something terribly anachronistic in wanting to think about reading today at the microscopic scale suited to a distribution of voices that belongs to an epoch in which there were only a few papyrus rolls being handed around? And above all, what could possibly be left of that old vocality when my reading is becoming more and more hypertextual, distant, or mechanical, when I click on links that take me from one text to the next or when I search for the occurrences of a word in a work that is thus more like a database than a bound and paginated book? One does not pronounce a click. One does not vocalize or subvocalize the pure movement of referral from one passage to another. When all that is left is a search engine churning, the inner voice is left behind.

Granted. Yet the question is probably formulated in the wrong way. Maybe it should even be turned around: instead of looking for what might be left of hypovocalization in the era of hyperreading, one should take the current disruptions as the context in which to ask what *will have been* the voices that *will have* constituted the public or private scenes of reading for so many readers over so many centuries. If there is indeed an atrophy of voice as reading accelerates (a point that remains to be proven), the least one can say is that

this is part of a complex mutation: I still make silent speeches and counterspeeches to myself as I browse through Google Books; many imperatives, many mumbled pronouncements, often contradictory ones, resonate inside me, interrupting one another as I jump from sentence to sentence, letting myself be carried by the flow of this world literature for which the internet could be a metonymy. My experience as a reader is certainly not that of Phaedrus reading Lysias's speech to Socrates or that of the nameless slave lending his voice to the characters debating in Plato's dialogue titled the *Theaetetus*. And yet, the way their voices share the scene can teach me a lot about the way my voices are distributed in a reading that may well be hypertextual but is far from being voiceless. And vice versa: my vocalizing practices of reading might well, in return, throw new light on the immemorial phonoscenography of reading.

It is therefore perhaps not so much that my voice disappears as that the speed of reading increases. (How could I be sure of that anyway, since it was already only a quasi-voice, a silent voice?) As we will see, it is rather theirs, Phaedrus's or the slave's voice, like the voice of so many readers since, that could, in the end, appear to us as being already a *speed differential*: their voice preceded itself, moved ahead of itself, was also delayed with respect to itself; it contracted and slackened by constantly making room for some not reading at the very heart of reading, for distraction even at the points of the most intense attention, one feeding the other and vice versa.¹¹

Nonreading, in sum, in which zero speed and infinite speed are conjoined or exchanged, has no doubt always been accommodated within reading.

P.S. I barely dare add more words to this introduction, which is already too long. I have a number of misgivings about inscribing them here and will do so in a smaller font, to try to avoid burdening you too much. For you must already be tired, dear reader, tired out by this verbose preamble, tired ahead of time by what will follow: so many pages, so much time, so much effort. . . .

(Rest assured, you are not the only one to experience such fatigue. László Krasznahorkai, whose stories will tell us so much about the temporality of reading, addresses the reader of “Isaiah Has Come” in these terms: “Dear solitary, tired, sensitive reader. . . .” And *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, Italo Calvino’s novel, which we will read as a vast staging of sexual difference in the reading voice, ends with this question: “Aren’t you tired of reading?”)

If then, like me, you are tired at the prospect of everything there is to read (and even to not read or to hyperread), I imagine that you will readily share my weariness in the face of all these manifestos for this or that way of reading that seem to flourish, especially in the anglophone world. Each type of reading claims to wipe out the previous ones, move beyond their failures, put them, and their claims, in their place.

As we saw, the distant reading championed by Moretti claims to have surpassed the close reading that had prevailed until then. According to others, it is surface reading that should replace the symptomatic reading to which Louis Althusser was so attached: Reading, they say, will no longer necessarily be about unearthing what is hidden under the text, its unformulated presuppositions; rather, reading will involve paying attention to what is in the text, nothing more (“just reading” is the name of this way of reading that does nothing other than “just read”). Yet others challenge symptomatic reading not with a surface reading, but with reparative reading, which aims to move beyond a suspicious attitude to the text and rehabilitate a certain naiveté or surprise in relation to it. Distant, close, superficial, symptomatic, just, reparative: the list goes on. (There are those who talk about “uncritical” reading, or “mere” reading.)

Despite the relevance of many of the arguments made here and there,¹² it almost feels as though one has stumbled into an academic supermarket in which a scholar who must read for a living can choose between various reading practices as though he were choosing between various brands of low-fat or skim milk. These debates, these choices on which careers and reputations depend, sometimes seem like tempests in a teapot. Each of these modifications, which present themselves as revolutions spawning a new type of reader, seem, in fact, to revisit roles that the history of reading configured long ago.

Consider the distant reading dear to Moretti: to map the phenomena that he studies at large scales, such as the spread of English and French novels in Europe

around 1850, he consults national bibliographical catalogues in order to cull statistics concerning the translations of these novels, their frequency, their speed. Or again, to support global geopolitical hypotheses about the birth of the modern novel as a compromise between Western influence and local components, he compares dozens of critical studies, admitting, sometimes with a good dose of humor, almost as though it were a sin, that “actually,” he made an exception and “did read” some of the novels in question.¹³ In order to characterize this metareading, which involves collecting and classifying data, Moretti proposed distant reading as a slogan, in contrast to the close reading that prevailed in literary studies in the anglophone world since the 1920s.

Yet if we take a closer look (dare I still say that?), the ideal of detailed reading such as it was celebrated by the New Criticism itself depended on data collection that was closer to metareading than what one would imagine a reading in direct and close contact with the text to be. I. A. Richards’s *Practical Criticism*, considered a foundational work for *close reading* (an expression that makes several notable appearances in the work), presents itself as series of experiments requiring readers to take note of their readings of certain chosen poems:

For some years I have made the experiment of issuing printed sheets of poems . . . to audiences who were requested to comment freely in writing upon them. The authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions it was not recognized. After a week’s interval I would collect these comments. . . . I lectured the following week partly upon the poems, but rather more upon the comments, or protocols, as I call them.¹⁴

One of the first and most famous defenders of close reading thus preferred to rely on derivative readings, readings of readings, or metareadings. It is as though the distance of metadata already inhabited the proximity that claimed to be most immediate.

But distant or hypertextual reading, metareading, comes to us from even further back than the close reading it is supposed to oppose after a century. We will see it embodied, for instance, in Faust, who, in the course of an extraordinary scene orchestrated by Goethe in the second part of his tragedy, flies over millennia of world literature. And especially, we will constantly have cause to wonder whether, in the end, the way it is already the case in Plato, every reading

is necessarily both close and distant at the same time, a vocal (or quasi-vocal) interlacing of distancing and contiguity. For being a distribution of voices, reading is both transitive (the reading voice erases itself in favor of the voice that it reads—it disappears the better to let that other voice transpire as the voice that speaks) and reflexive (one can always lend an ear to the voice that reads rather than to the voice that it reads). If there is indeed a triangulation in reading (my voice carries his or her voice addressed to *your* ear, whoever or whatever *we* are), it is a triangle that opens and closes constantly, according to systoles and diastoles that precede and make possible any distinction between proximity and distance.¹⁵

A Strangely Familiar Voice

(“The Sandman”)

“Dear reader,” he says.

This way of being addressed or apostrophized is familiar, isn’t it? We have read this phrase so many times, encountered it so often, heard it rolled out in many tones, varied in many ways. We will soon find it surfacing repeatedly under some of its innumerable guises in Michel de Montaigne, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Charles Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Valéry, Italo Calvino, László Krasznahorkai. . . .

But whose words are they here?

The speaker is currying favor with the reader. He would like to lead the reader to be well-disposed, kindly, favorably inclined (*geneigt*). With a certain passion, almost as though he were getting carried away, he turns to the reader — to us, then — exclaiming “oh, my reader!” (*o mein Leser!*) The narrator of E. T. A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman” thus shares with me, as a reader, his doubts, his hesitations as to the right way to begin the story that he has decided to tell. Should he begin with the usual “Once upon a time . . .”? That is a rather bland (*nüchtern*) start. Will he plunge the reader straight into the action, in medias res? The narrator doesn’t seem convinced by that option, either. In the end, he admits that “unable to find words that seemed to reflect anything of the prismatic radiance of my inner vision,” and he “decided not to begin at all.”¹

Did I read what I just read correctly? “Not to begin at all” (*gar nicht anzufangen*)? But I have been following the plot of “The Sandman” for quite a while already! How am I supposed to understand that nothing has begun when I am almost halfway through the story?

Obviously, something has begun (how can we deny it at this point?) without, however, the narrator himself having done anything to get things going. They got going by themselves as it were, as he explains by engaging me directly: “Be so good, dear [*geneigter*] reader, as to accept the three letters, kindly communicated to me by my friend Lothar,” he declares, signifying thereby that what I have read up to now is not his writing, that he has simply offered up for my reading a correspondence to which he contributed nothing.

Granted. That is no doubt what the narrator means to say. Yet why do I have a strange feeling that I cannot shake? Why is it that this passage seems so strange as it addresses me directly (“Dear reader,” “well-disposed reader” . . .), as though I needed to be woken from a dream?

We need to backtrack a little in order to understand what is going on here. What have I read so far? I have read letters, three letters in which the correspondents evoke reading and tell each other that they should or should not read one another or themselves. In his first letter to Lothar, for instance, Nathanael admits that he “liked nothing better than hearing or reading.”² In other words, Nathanael is our double; he is the mirror image of we who are readers of “The Sandman,” we who passionately read the letter in which he declares his passion for reading stories like the story of the Sandman.

The second of the three letters is the one Clara writes to Nathanael. She begins by confessing a mistake, a destination mistake: she read something she should not have read, Nathanael’s letter to Lothar. To be precise, she read what *we* just read, the letter in which Nathanael talks among other things about his passion for reading. “I should have read no further,” she writes, but then immediately admits that she could not resist: “I read and read!” (*ich las und las!*)³

Thus, Nathanael and Clara, our doubles, love reading and cannot stop. Reading what we read (the story of the Sandman or the very letter we just read), they have preceded us in the reading. And when we are then interpellated as “dear reader” or “well-disposed reader,” when the narrator says there has not been a beginning, we get the impression that what he is actually referring to is reading: the reading has not begun because it was already under way. No one began to read, because there was already reading going on, and there were already readers reading before we recognized ourselves as such or among them. The strangeness I felt when I read this passage comes from an impression of *déjà vu*: as readers, we repeat what the characters were already doing, that is, reading. This means we do not initiate our reading: it, our reading, which is not really “ours,” comes back at us from a distant past, its beginning seemingly lost and erased somewhere in the characters’ past. Thus, if Hoffman’s story is indeed a scene of what Freud called the *unheimlich*, the uncanny, this perhaps plays out above all in the reading, in the act of reading.

Why?



As is well known, Sigmund Freud attributed the uncanny in Hoffman’s story to the figure of the Sandman, that frightening figure whose mention terrified children and helped to scare them into obedience at bedtime. For Nathanael, the terrifying character represented the threat of being deprived of his eyes. (He was told that the Sandman steals the eyes of children who do not go to sleep.) Freud immediately transposes this: “We shall venture, therefore, to refer the uncanny effect of the Sand-Man to the anxiety belonging to the castration complex of childhood.”⁴ It is this repressed anxiety that returns in another shape when Nathanael thinks he recognized the Sandman of his childhood — he had identified him as/with Coppelius, the lawyer who often visited his father — in a barometer salesman named Coppola, who insisted on selling him eyes, that is glasses.

All this is far from reading, especially if we consider, as we constantly will, that reading (even when soundless) is a matter of voice rather than sight. The Freudian interpretation of the uncanny in “The Sandman” insists on the visual or ocular motif, which is indeed preeminent in the story. Nevertheless, the importance of vision and optical instruments—glasses, the spyglass through which Nathanael watches Olimpia’s window, her “strangely fixed and dead” eyes—should not prevent us from lending an ear to another motif, one that may be less noticeable but is nevertheless just as recurrent, that of reading.

Indeed, as the story continues beyond the three letters with which it started, without, as we saw, beginning, reading returns repeatedly. When Nathanael returns home to Clara, he spends his time trying to convince her of the existence of the supernatural: “Early in the morning, when Clara was helping to make breakfast, he would stand beside her, reading aloud from all manner of mystical books.” But prosaic Clara is not inclined to follow his wandering mind and does not listen: “If I drop everything, as you demand, and gaze into your eyes while you read, the coffee will run over into the fire.” Nathanael, who wanted to launch into an uninterrupted reading with her, “clap[s] the books shut”⁶ and retires to his room.

Soon, Nathanael will have occasion for uninterrupted reading to Olimpia, the automaton he has fallen for. Without necessarily following Freud, who sees in Olimpia “the materialization of Nathanael’s feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy,” we can take Nathanael literally when he says, “only in Olimpia’s love do I recognize myself.”⁷ And when he reads to the wooden doll, it is as though he were reading for himself: “From the darkest recesses of his desk Nathanael fetched everything he had ever written. Poems, fantasies, visions, novels, stories were supplemented daily by all manner of incoherent sonnets, *ballades*, and *canzoni*, which he read to Olimpia for hours on end without ever wearying. But then, he had never had such a perfect listener.”⁸

Her “fixed look” and her mechanical gestures are the grounds for

Olimpia being described three times as *unheimlich* in the story,⁹ and yet there is also something uncanny in the way she listens to the various things Nathanael reads aloud to her. For Olimpia is perhaps, after Nathanael and Clara, the ultimate figure in which we, readers, find our own reflections in “The Sandman”: we are so taken, so absorbed in the plot, our curiosity is so excited, that it does not occur to us to interrupt the flow of sentences. Like Olimpia, we simply listen continuously to what is articulated for us. Just as Nathanael did when speaking to her, we forget that what captivates us is only what we read to ourselves.

As an *unheimlich* stand in for us readers, as a double for both Nathanael and us, Olympia embodies the moment when reading forgets itself, the better to produce itself. Borrowing Freud’s language, we might, however, ask: What has had to be repressed in order for reading to become some sort of purely transitive verb, in order for reading to become only an immediate and uninterrupted dive into the world of the text?

The answer lies in the particular feeling of vocal uncanniness, the intimate terror that grips Nathanael when, earlier in the story, he rereads the somber premonitory poem he composed: “When he had finished and read the poem aloud to himself [*das Gedicht für sich laut las*], he was gripped by wild horror and terror, and shrieked: ‘Whose hideous voice is this?’”¹⁰ It is hard to tell which voice this is. Does this horrible voice (*grauenvolle Stimme*) belong to the text Nathanael has just finished writing? Is it that of the text speaking, conveying what it has to say? Or is it Nathanael’s voice as he rereads his writing out loud, lending his voice, his horrible, unrecognizable, voice to the text? In other words, is it the voice of what is read or the voice of the one who reads?

We will soon revisit this undecidability, this unsettling vocal ambivalence, in a whole series of scenes from Plato to Sade and beyond. Each time, what we will come to recognize will be the voice we have as readers; it is a voice that must be forgotten or repressed for reading to take place (it must be erased for the text

to be heard through it) but that resists, that insists and makes itself heard, here and there, in its opacity.

As we will find out, it is paradoxically when the reading voice is interrupted that we notice it. (As long as it is reading, it disappears in the act of reading.) This is a voice that appears only when it disappears, a voice that disappears as it appears, a voice that is condemned to the intermittence of what we will call *reading points*. Marcel Proust described its oscillations in a few memorable sentences that will guide us throughout our investigation:

Before lunch, which would, alas, put an end to my reading, still lay two long hours. . . . Unfortunately, the cook would come in long before lunch, to set the table; if only she could do it without talking! But she felt obliged to say, "You must not be comfortable like that, should I move the table a little closer?" And merely in order to answer "No, thank you" it was necessary to come to a dead stop and bring back your voice from afar, the voice within your lips that had been swiftly and silently repeating all the words your eyes were reading; you had to bring that voice to a stop, send it out of your mouth, and, to manage a respectable "No, thank you," give it a semblance of ordinary life again, the tone of communication and interaction it had lost."¹¹

The reader's voice had to be brought back from afar. Returning from the far side (*revenante*), whether we notice it or not, the reader's voice always has that uncanniness that Nathanael's voice displays when he reads for himself.

All the reading voices we will encounter could be (Hoffmann would not argue with this) ghost voices, voices that will continue to haunt us.

The Anagnost and the Archon

In a letter to his friend Atticus, Cicero confides his grief: “My reader [*anagnōstēs*] Sositheus, a charming fellow [*puer festivus*], has died; and I am more upset about it than anyone would suppose that I should be about a slave’s death.”¹ Another letter, one Cicero received from a magistrate called Publius Vatinius, mentions a reading slave who had run away.² The anagnost — as Rabelais still recalled in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, this was the term — is ubiquitous in scenes of reading in the classical world. He reads for others; he is made to read.³

Some of these slaves apparently did much more than lend their voice to the text. They were real living archives, a little like in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, where books that are threatened with destruction and at risk of being forgotten survive because some people have learned them by heart. This archiving role, this recording role of the reading slave, is attested in one of the open letters Seneca addresses to the young Lucilius, Roman governor of Sicily at the time of Nero’s reign. He mentions a certain Calvisius Sabinius, a freed slave who seemed to be as rich as he was stupid:

His memory was so faulty that he would sometimes forget the name of Ulysses, or Achilles, or Priam. . . . But none the less did he desire to appear learned. So he devised this short cut to learning: he paid fabulous prices for slaves — one to know Homer by heart and another to know Hesiod; he also

delegated a special slave to each of the nine lyric poets. . . . After collecting this retinue, he began to make life miserable for his guests; he would keep these fellows at the foot of his couch, and ask them from time to time for verses which he might repeat, and then frequently break down in the middle of a word.⁴

The anagnost was thus a sort of talking book, a precursor to Henty, a fictional character in Evelyn Waugh's short story, "The Man Who Liked Dickens." When Henty becomes the last survivor of an expedition to the Amazon, the strange Mr. McMaster takes him in and nurses him. But when he recovers, he slowly realizes that it is impossible to leave his savior's house: he is kept prisoner in order that he may read Dickens's novels out loud.

When Henty first reads to his host, who will become his jailor, he remembers that "he had always rather enjoyed reading aloud and in the first year of marriage had shared several books in this way with his wife, until one day, in one of her rare moments of confidence, she remarked that it was torture to her."⁵ While being read to can thus be a source of suffering, a constraint, the subjugation clearly runs the other way at the end of this story when Henty discovers, to his horror, that he is condemned to read the same novels over and over again to the man who holds him prisoner: "Tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. Let us read *Little Dorrit* again."⁶

"The Man Who Liked Dickens" gives us one account of the survival of the anagnost. But, we also continue to encounter the anagnost in ourselves when we read silently — at least this is the hypothesis I am proposing. When we open a book, it is always in some sense an anagnost who begins to read in us. The reading slave — for instance, the anonymous "boy" who is hailed, as we will see, at the beginning of Plato's *Theaetetus* — basically plays the same role as a phonograph, the contraption that Thomas Edison explicitly described as useful for reading aloud.

Books may be read by the charitably-inclined professional reader, or by such readers especially employed for that purpose, and the record of such a book

used in the asylums of the blind, hospitals, the sick-chamber, or even with great profit and amusement by the lady or gentleman whose eyes and hands may be otherwise employed; or, again, because of the greater enjoyment to be had from a book when read by an elocutionist than when read by the average reader.⁷

The audiobook is a relatively recent invention (although there are visionary anticipations of it, for instance, in *Cyrano de Bergerac*).⁸ It should, however, be considered as a continuation, like a vocal prosthesis, of reading practices that we will find staged in Plato's dialogues. And when we will observe readers beginning to read in silence, we will have to reckon with the idea that the phonography of reading (whether it be the work of the slave reading out loud or the recording on discs by professional readers) has been in some sense swallowed up, immersed in each of us, interiorized in the intimate vocal scenography that sets the stage every time we read.



There is at least one more voice that, in principle, cannot be reduced to any of those three instances (I, you, he, she, they) in the intimate phonoscene of our reading, on this triangulated stage on which *you*, the anagnost, read for *me* something that was written by someone else. This is the voice that articulates the imperative to read, the one that simply says “read!” Who enunciates this imperative? To whom does this voice belong as it issues this injunction, silently or thunderously? We will not answer this question immediately (although, by reading, we are perhaps already responding to the injunction itself). We will not immediately try to identify a “who” behind this command to read. Rather, we will let various figures appear as we read, figures who might provide incarnations of this voice, but who are also destined to pass on the role (for instance, Euclides ordering the anagnost to read in Plato's *Theaetetus* or the mother in Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*). Above