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## Reading Toward Breath: A Poetic Ecology of Creative Reading

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READING TOWARD BREATH: A POETIC ECOLOGY OF CREATIVE READING

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy.  
Rhetorics, Communications, and Information Design

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by  
Jessica Schad Manuel  
August 2022

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Ufuk Ersoy, Committee Chair  
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Dr. Andreea Mihalache

## **ABSTRACT**

Reading is an act of perception that begins in wonder and leads to wisdom. It is not a response to writing but a response-ability we have to interact with the world around us and the phenomena before us. Reading with the body leads to wisdom, and when we participate in our existence by being in the world, we are reading. So what is reading? Reading is making. We make connections, and we form relationships. The act of reading is more than a cognitive process and even surpasses the phenomenological encounter.

My research describes the reader's relationship to the text as an act of perception that I liken to breathing. This relationship includes reception - the receiving of input, transformation - interacting with phenomena - and creation - the making of meaning. Reading includes several registers of perception, including but not limited to encounters of and with sensation, language, imagination, music, and nature. How we orient ourselves to these activities in space and time determines how we read, breathe, and live. I use the metaphor of breath to help my reader imagine the kind of relationship to reading that I am after, one characterized by correspondence between the reader's body and the reader's environment.

## **DEDICATION**

To Bruce and for Bam, Zeke, and Aria.

May your worlds expand as you read.

Let us unfold each page together.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first want to acknowledge the sacrifice my family has made to support me in this project. My husband, Bruce, has sacrificed more than anyone and we have grown in love together throughout this program. Our growth together pursuing challenges brings me deep, abiding joy. My three children, Bam, Zeke, and Aria, provided love and encouragement at every step of this journey. To complete this alongside of them is my greatest honor. My parents also encouraged me along the way, and made it possible for me to finish by stepping in to care for my kids while I placed the finishing touches on this dissertation.

This project expresses my passion and care for reading that is a result of the enthusiastic teachers, mentors, and friends who have shared their love of literature and philosophy with me. Dr. Ufuk Ersoy has supported my scholarship with unparalleled generosity as a mentor whose service went beyond the call of duty, offering me a directed study and weekly conversations as well as consistency throughout my writing journey. These conversations and the insight shared remain the most formative aspect of my degree and will continue to shape me and my work in the future.

Additionally, Dr. Cynthia Haynes has encouraged me to take risks with my writing. Dr. Gabriel Hankins provided copious feedback at various stages of my writing and thinking and pointed me toward invaluable resources. Dr. Andreea Mihalache remained a positive force and sounding board willing. All four members of my committee inspired me to weave in my unique theoretical insights alongside my life experiences and literary wanderings.

The RCID program has opened me up to new paths of thinking and creativity. I am grateful for Dr. Victor Vitanza's vision for this program. In addition to my committee, I had many professors who helped guide me throughout my studies, including Drs. David Blakesley, Jordan Frith, Jan Holmevik, and Christina Hung. My RCID colleagues have shown love and encouragement and many friendships have grown throughout this program. I am especially thankful to Ryan Garner for his friendship and conversation without which this project would not be what it is.

Lastly, I want to thank my Book Oblivion community. Our years of conversation have helped me work out my ideas, make new connections, and continue to shape me as a reader. This project would not exist without Book Oblivion. My hope is that the work in these pages will manifest through our organization in the coming years.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Transforming 1984**

The year is 1984. George Orwell's dystopian future has arrived. Ronald Regan is president-elect, and Wes Craven's nightmare occupies Elm Street. Not only is it a leap year, but it is the year of the rat according to the Chinese Zodiac. Haruki Murakami places the finishing touches on his fourth novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. Trevor Noah is born a crime under the apartheid regime in South Africa. Prince crawls across a floor of purple violets in the music video for Billboard's number one song, "When Doves Cry." Yugoslavia hosts the Winter Olympics, and people worldwide gather in Los Angeles to watch athletes compete in the Summer Olympics. William Gibson's debut cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* hits the shelves. Oprah Winfrey relocates to Chicago to host her first talk show. Across Lake Michigan, on the other side of the state, the Detroit Tigers defeat the San Diego Padres in game five of the World Series. Mary Oliver wins the Pulitzer Prize for Literature for her collection of poems, *American Primitive*. Beyond the horizon, American astronauts Bruce McCandless II and Robert Stewart take a five-hour walk in space untethered for the first time. A member of the Muscogee Nation and poet Joy Harjo takes home the honor of Outstanding Young Women of America at 33 years old. Architect Richard Saul Wurman hosts the first TED conference in Monterey, California. After seven years of construction, the Monterey Bay Aquarium opens its doors on Cannery Row. North on the 101, Steve Wozniak attends the first Hackers Conference in Marin County organized in response to

Steven Levy's book, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*. Wozniak's future partner Steve Jobs launches the Apple Macintosh. On the other side of the country, the Los Angeles Raiders dominate the Washington Redskins in Tampa, Florida, for Super Bowl XVIII, the same Super Bowl that airs Apple's famous commercial promising to revolutionize technology so that "1984 won't be like 1984."

As Apple connects technological innovation to individual genius to inspire cultural consumption that will transform the way we live, an early precursor to the iPhone is unearthed halfway around the world. Archeologists discover two small unbaked clay tablets in Tell Brak, Syria. These small stone slabs predate the iPhone by approximately 6000 years and are thought to carry some of the earliest written inscriptions. Housed in the Archeological Museum of Baghdad, Argentine-Canadian author, Alberto Manguel, a devoted reader and friend of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, will visit these clay tablets five years from now, in 1989. Inscribed upon the tablets are depictions of one goat and one sheep with a marking thought to signal the number ten. Manguel traces the origins of writing to these tablets that farmers used to communicate the quantity of livestock: "By the mere fact of looking at these tablets, we have prolonged a memory from the beginnings of our time, preserved a thought long after the thinker has stopped thinking, and made ourselves participants in the act of creation that remains open for as long as the incised images are seen, deciphered, read."<sup>1</sup> Tracing the history of reading to these Sumerian tablets affirms Plato's fears articulated in the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus that writing externalizes memory and hinders remembering.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Penguin, 2014), 27-28.

The more I consider Plato's concerns, which are often dismissed for being Luddite, the more I realize how radically his fears have been realized. Writing *does* externalize memories, but that is not necessarily the problem. His concern was less about the technology of writing and more about our misuse of it. He differentiates reminding from remembering, insisting that writing remedies the former but hinders the latter. This new technology, he feared, will give the appearance of wisdom but will not foster authentic learning. Plato says philosophy begins in wonder and privileges quality of thought in a different dialogue. Had Plato understood the reader's power to internalize writing as phenomena in a way that transforms how the reader lives and creates culture, he might have felt differently about the technology of writing. He might have realized that reading with the body leads to wisdom and when we participate in our existence by being in the world, we are reading. So what is reading? Reading is making. We make connections and we form relationships. We read to remember.

The problem is we do not read in a way that increases remembering, which means we are less inclined to read toward the feeling of being alive that comes from forming meaningful connections to our surroundings. We think reminding is the goal of reading and applauding technologies like writing and computers that aid our ability to recall information. Reading is not just a response to writing, it is an act of perception, and if we embrace that, reading can change how we live. Readers perceive phenomena from waves to stars to words to tears. There is no end to the potential texts a reader interacts with, but how a reader interacts with the texts before her changes everything. Come, reader. Take a deep breath.

In his book, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning After the Crisis of Modern Science*, Architect Alberto Perez-Gomez describes how a visitor transforms a space every time she visits it, just like the reader renews a poem every time she reads it.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between the reader and her text is marked by mutual transformation, one that we can characterize by breath. Irish philosopher Richard Kearney likens the reading experience to a double movement of Janus facing two directions simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> In one direction, back toward what is revealed, and forward toward the language that does the revealing in the other.

Janus was the Roman god whose name meant passage or doorway and whose presence symbolized beginnings and endings. The reader, like Janus, is open to this double movement. Still, Kearney takes it one step beyond bodily orientation when he acknowledges that this double movement happens at the level of language.<sup>4</sup> Reading a text not only produces the meaning of the text but also opens up new horizons for the reader. We see this double movement further manifested in our relationship to memory and place. Echoing Heraclitus, we never enter the same river twice, but not only because we have changed. The river, like the text, remembers us. Still, some thinkers are more willing to acknowledge the transformative potential of energy in places than they are in written texts. Once again, we read to remember. Memories do not stand still but lead the reader toward the wisdom that carries the past into the present moment while facing forward to the future to build a better world.

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<sup>2</sup> Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2015), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 27.

It is still 1984. Chronos and Kairos have nothing on Janus. As I transform from an embryo to a fetus in my mother's womb in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, a young Cynthia Haynes attends her first doctoral seminar under the guidance of Victor Vitanza. The course is titled Rhetorics of Reading and is held in Room 201 of College Hall at the University of Texas at Arlington on Thursday nights. This course lays the foundation for creative thinking and writing that begets the doctoral program in Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design at Clemson University twenty years from now. I will complete this program in 37 years by asking the same question hidden in the cells of its genesis: how do we read in a meaningful way?

While there are many potential paths, I explore one that spirals: we read to remember and give our lives meaning through memory. Reading starts with inclination, detours to wonder, moves to interaction, and then integrates experience that turns into wisdom and results in innovation. The meaning we invent and discover through reading with the body increases the feeling of being alive. This dissertation offers several essays that my reader might consider single stars in the spiral galaxy of reading. The constellation is yours to draw in the night sky. I invite you to read untethered as I demonstrate how to read toward breath in our contemporary cultural moment so that 1984 won't feel like *1984*.

### **All In One Breath**

This project enacts an alternate approach to reading that brings the text back inside the body and leads to the mutual transformation of reader and culture. This dissertation is about changing the way we read. The way we read influences the way we live. Instead of reading for utility, I propose a method of reading that inclines us toward the nourishing

and transformative effects of breath. As we interact with phenomena, we make meaning, and meaning in the form of connections, relationships, and narratives increases the feeling of being alive. As we transform, we transform the world around us.

As readers, we need to turn toward breath. To do this, I offer an approach that decreases the distance between the reader and her text and emphasizes the formation between two entities - both fully alive. This proximity encourages connections and relations between two unique existents, the reader and her text, ultimately expanding the reader's horizons. This expansion perpetuates life as the reader makes meaning by relating narratives with the text as she moves through time and space. I borrow the phrase "relating narratives" from Adriana Cavarero's work by the same title.<sup>5</sup> In this text, she advocates listening and attuning ourselves to another so that we can create a narrative of the other person's life experiences for them. Relating this narrative is a gift that one person gives another.

Despite the many mind-blowing inventions over the last eight millennia and the ways they have influenced conscious awareness, we are tragically unimaginative about the practice of reading. When we conceive of writing the way Socrates does, as preservation of artificial memory separated from the body, we forfeit our ability to participate in the simultaneous act of reception *and* creation that reading is. My dissertation focuses on how we engage information at the lowest point of contact: reading. To read for self-formation and ultimately a cultural transformation, we must rediscover what reading is and start to relate to what we read on purpose.

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<sup>5</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2014).

To achieve this level of engagement with the text, I follow a spiral path that begins in the body and ends by drawing constellations in the night sky. Walter Benjamin introduced the constellation idea in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. What he emphasizes in this work is how we study the star with the constellation - or the object with the idea.<sup>6</sup> Each star is a luminous ball of gas held together by gravity. I imagine the same amount of energy found in a star is packed into each word - maybe even more. This is the energy hidden in language - a gravitational force we cannot measure without grace. When Paul Valéry calls language the common material shared by poets and philosophers, the emphasis is twofold. Not only can poets and philosophers name the stars, but they also order them to communicate with others and cultivate humanity by relating narratives across time and through space. Arranging phenomena is not about control but allows us to care for, preserve, protect, and dwell with the world's materiality. This organizing principle will enable us to perceive the relationships between the stars.

Jorge Luis Borges calls the book an axis of innumerable relationships.<sup>7</sup> Instead of focusing on the book as the axis point, this project explores the reader - the embodied human - as an axis of countless relationships between intertwining and animated phenomena. I attend to the complexities of the reader's relationship with visible and invisible energies that intersect the imagination, the author, the text, the world, and the community to enrich the reading experience. This richness will increase energy, expand consciousness, inspire reciprocity within the reading relationship, and perpetuate enlivenment. This dissertation aims to open up our thinking about the activity of reading

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 34-35.

<sup>7</sup> Jorge L. Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007), 213-214.

to recover a loving and creative relationship with language. There is a critical need for an ecology of reading that allows readers to combine energies from the imagination and the wisdom of everyday experience to build new worlds in response to texts.

Reading is typically considered a cognitive process of decoding marks on a page. After the prints are decoded, the image of thought is evoked, and the scene is remembered. The memory image is synaesthetic and includes sight, touch, smell, and taste. As the memory image is experienced and encoded in the brain's neural network, meaning is negotiated between the text and the reader. We call the first part of this process reading and the second part of this process interpretation. Interpretation is based on the reader's perception, including previously constructed symbols passed down through communities. While this process remains fruitful for some, I expand a text's interpretive potential by appreciating a multisensory relationship. This project focuses on enhancing that relationship. Readers orient themselves to texts in space and time and integrate the narratives they relate into their daily lives before responding by creating culture.

In the following pages, I prescribe a way of reading that enhances the reader's bodily, metaphorical, biological, symbolic, and spiritual relationship with the text and show how these dimensions conspire to create rich connections of meaning. Strengthening the reading relationship increases the reader's sense of response-ability to the text.<sup>8</sup> One way to demonstrate care for the text is through a creative response emphasizing making or innovating. This creative response to perceiving phenomena is critical to my creative

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<sup>8</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 110.

reading practice. We need to bring the information we read inside our bodies, offering readers infinite possibilities to connect with what they read and integrate the knowledge into their everyday lives. I follow thinkers like Luce Irigaray by rejecting the disembodied Platonic approach to epistemology. More simply, we cannot read without the body.<sup>9</sup> I champion an embodied approach to reading and demonstrate how rich creative reading is for personal formation and cultural transformation. I show how reading is an interactive exercise that perpetuates a desire to remember by relating narratives. Remembered experience is integrated into the body, which leads to wisdom. My research describes a critical phenomenological orientation to reading to show how the text shapes consciousness without depriving consciousness of the agency to shape the world.<sup>10</sup>

How we orient ourselves in space and time in relation to the text determines whether we read toward breath and for life instead of death. Reading is an act of perception, and movement is the essence of perception, requiring an ongoing relationship with language and the environment that we might liken to correspondence. Correspondence with the text celebrates bodies as narrative horizons woven together by a plurality of experiences. In the same way, the text embodies a plurality of voices. We need a reading practice that acknowledges this relationship between the body and voices of the text as an intertwining so that we might embrace the rich perceptual unfolding that occurs in every reading moment. Ultimately, my project cultivates a creative reading posture that celebrates life, and the key to life is movement. When the reader expands her perception and combines

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<sup>9</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," Gail Weiss, Gayle Salamon, and Ann V. Murphy, *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 13.

wonder and wisdom, the reader experiences mutual transformation with the text, leading to the feeling of being alive. Finally and most profoundly, reading continually and perpetually makes us, expands us, and inspires us to create.

### *Questions*

This project explores life-giving answers to a few central questions: what happens when we pursue a reading practice that highlights the embodied reader as an axis of innumerable relationships between the book, imagination, author, community, and world? How might a reading practice that attends to details, delights in ambiguities, and moves with culture foster meaningful connections between reader and phenomena? Can readers respond to ambiguity with existential courage instead of despair? Can we read to create culture instead of destroying it? How does the convergence of knowing, doing, and making change our experience of the book? And perhaps most importantly and centrally: how do we read in a meaningful way?

### *Methods*

To turn these questions of meaning and relationships over, my research focuses on three related areas of inquiry: phenomenologies of reading, carnal hermeneutics, and narrative architectures. This dissertation starts from an observation that my composition students have grown increasingly more reluctant to read. Although I like to avoid overly dramatic language, I caught myself googling, “why do people hate to read?” The results tragically confirmed my observations. People hate reading for various reasons, including low skill levels, bad memories associated with reading, distraction, poor quality reading

material, it's not cool, fear of punishment, and fear of answers.<sup>11</sup> This is not my list, but it resonates with some of my conclusions and demonstrates that others see the problem. My unique contribution is twofold: I propose a theory articulating the genesis of this problem and combine several phenomenological approaches to offer an alternative approach to reading. My dissertation aims to communicate a reading posture that generates wonder and leads to wisdom to help my readers recognize how to read in a more meaningful, life-giving way.

### *Theory*

I argue that reading is an act of perception. The Latin term *perceptio* implies gathering and receiving, and this definition is how most people conceive of reading - all input. Perception has evolved from these etymological implications and now includes organizing, identifying, and interpreting a sensation to form mental representations.<sup>12</sup> Sense is a felt bodily experience and concerns how our bodies interact with the world. Perception includes the reception of sensory information and implies arranging that information, which suggests it is both receptive and creative.

My research describes reading as an act of perception that includes both reception - the receiving of input - and creation - the making of meaning. Reception is enhanced through carnal hermeneutics, a field of study that appreciates how meaning is made in the body and between bodies—the creative aspects of reading increase through expanding our potential narrative architectures. Narrative architecture celebrates storied patterns

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<sup>11</sup> M. Farouk Radwan, "7 Reasons Some People Hate Reading," 2KnowMySelf, accessed June 14, 2022, [https://www.2knowmyself.com/7\\_reasons\\_some\\_people\\_hate\\_reading](https://www.2knowmyself.com/7_reasons_some_people_hate_reading).

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Schacter et al., *Psychology* (New York: Worth, 2016), 237.

observed through careful consideration of lived experience. The combination of these research areas offers a unique perspective on how storytelling contributes to our shared sense of aliveness in what is called the commons.

Our conception of perception has evolved, but we need our concept of reading to do the same. Reading intertwines several registers of perception, including but not limited to sensation, language, imagination, music, and nature. We navigate these experiences through interaction and integrate the information we apprehend into our bodies to form memories. These memories help make us who we are and influence who we are becoming, but they also inspire us to create or innovate. Inspire is the right word here, in the sense that reading is like breath, and input, like oxygen, leaves the reader transformed but also transforming her surroundings. The expressive aspect of reading is a critical part of this reading practice. Cultivating the humanities through making, building, creating, and innovating is a natural part of the reading process. This creative, life-giving aspect is far more evident when we read in a meaningful way. We make meaning as a response to reading, but this is more than a cognitive process and manifests materially in the world.

To read meaningfully, we change our orientation to reading by inclining ourselves toward the living relationships between ourselves and the phenomena we interact with instead of distancing ourselves from them. This means readers bring sensations inside our bodies by attending to and being with them. My focus throughout this study is on the reader's relationship to the reading activity. I occasionally deviate from the reader's relationship to reading to redefine the movement of reading itself. Reading is a living, breathing, perceptive experience - at least, that is how it started. While I think it is safe to

say that most people do not consider their relationship to reading at all, when they do, it is likely for negative reasons. Our current approach to reading leads to stasis, disconnection, or fusion - ideas I loosely associate with death for reasons I expand on in chapter two. I argue this orientation toward death results from a reading approach concerned with cognitively processing information instead of allowing that information to form us from the inside out and back again. My dissertation demonstrates how cognition is an intimate part of bodily existence by focusing on the way readers make meaning in space, through time, and between two unique existents.

### *Terms*

I turn from regarding the book as an abstract or static representation to embracing knowledge in the form of a text as communication, acknowledging texts are always communicative. Most frequently, I call the object of reading text or phenomena but occasionally interchange these for book, poem, painting, or weather phenomena, depending on the point I make in context. I am particularly interested in the reader's response to and relationship with any text. I use some terms throughout to communicate the need for readers to enhance their participation with the text. The term participation is one I inherited from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but Mircea Eliade used it before him, and David Abram and Andreas Weber used it after him. Owen Barfield's idea of participation and how it transformed with literate cultures is implied in these approaches to participation. Correspondence is another way to characterize this participation, and it effectively communicates the intertwining that occurs when a reader perceives phenomena. Tim Ingold inspired me to include it as part of my lexicon. Correspondence

also implies reciprocity, which has become increasingly crucial after appreciating Luce Irigaray's notion of twoness in *Two Be Two* and Robin Wall Kimmerer's approach to ecology in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.<sup>13</sup> I use the term inclination to describe the posture of the reader, willing to participate and open to the life-giving, wonder-inducing experiences of reading. It is not only an inclination to the text that I am after but an inclination to a life of varied backgrounds and rich connections. This term comes from Adriana Cavarero's *Inclinations*. She uses it to correct the erect posture inherited from epistemological and ontological dispositions built on certainty. Once the reader interacts with the text, mystical or poetic dilation occurs. This idea stems from Jean Louis Chretien, who builds on Augustine. Dilation is expansion, and this idea parallels Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative time which contains an expansive notion of time and space.

### *Overview of Chapters*

Chapter one offers a creative introduction to the problems of reading and offers a general overview of the dissertation. Chapter two further describes the genesis of the problems associated with our current reading issues, including an emphasis on information that leads to abstraction, stasis, disconnection, and fusion. Here, I demonstrate that sight-oriented perception limits epistemology by correlating truth and certainty and offer a correction that celebrates a multisensory interaction with phenomena. Instead of advancing the favored approach of fusion, I advocate for a relationship with the text that maintains a relationship between two unique existents. This chapter establishes a call to enhance our connection to information or phenomena.

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<sup>13</sup> Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (London: Routledge, 2017). Robin W. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013).

The answer to this call is based on the metaphor of breath. I use this as a guiding image to describe the reading process and an organizational strategy to provide the framework for my approach to reading. The breath metaphor sets up the body chapters of my project, which reflect the process of inhalation, transformation, and exhalation.

Chapter two focuses on inhalation and describes how memory and imagination come together in material representations. Chapter three focuses on transformation, and the guiding image concerns what occurs in the body when inhaling. A metabolic transformation occurs as we interact with phenomena and integrate our experiences into our lives. Chapter four focuses on exhalation and offers insight into how changed readers turn around to change the world.

These chapters loosely reflect my research areas, including the phenomenologies of reading, carnal hermeneutics, and narrative architectures. These areas inform three critical ideas for reading toward breath: the material imagination, carnal hermeneutics, and the body as a narrative horizon. Each chapter clarifies the need for sensory perception and symbolic resonance to work in tandem with each perceptual act.

Chapter five expands on the material imagination, carnal hermeneutics, and narrative architecture through an approach to reading with the body that conceptualizes what it means to read for life, and that is by relating reading to breathing. Breathing and reading are similar processes in that they are simultaneously material, spiritual, imaginative, symbolic, metaphorical, and biological. This chapter functions as an application, though it continues to weave in theoretical insights and adds complexity to my argument.

## CHAPTER TWO

### READING MATTERS

“What is important now is to recover our senses.

We must learn to see more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.”

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*<sup>14</sup>

The current posture toward reading increases distance, disconnection, and isolation, prompting readers to make love like an intellectual, to borrow a phrase from Milan Kundera.<sup>15</sup> Educators and literary theorists sought to correct this cold disposition, but their attempts created a wasteland. For years, academic instruction has focused on deconstruction, a reading method that emphasizes the relationship between words and their meanings is arbitrary and conventional. Before I paint a vision of how life-giving reading can be, this chapter elaborates on the different approaches to reading instruction and our posture toward writing have exacerbated the widespread disinterest in reading. An orientation toward utility has led to our reading with a stance toward death. Not only is our educational system built on a model of stasis, disconnection, and abstraction, but our current remedies for the decline in reading prioritize fusion or immersion and problematically emphasize feeling over meaning instead of offering an approach to reading that includes both.

#### Reluctant Readers

Eleven years ago, I earned a Master of Arts in Literature and began teaching

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 14.

<sup>15</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 6.

undergraduate composition students for the first time. As a first-generation college student, I was eager to set my students up for success. The first course I taught was your average first-year writing course. I started each semester with an informal prompt to learn something about my students: what is your relationship to reading and writing? This is called a metacognitive question, and I asked it to encourage my students to personally reflect on thoughts and ideas they associate with reading and writing. This reflection inspired my students to consider the way reading has shaped them throughout the years and whether it continues to shape them now. Their answers gave me something to connect to and a way to orient myself within the classroom landscape.

How students piece together reading and writing moments from their lives is the start of something called a literacy narrative. Literacy narratives describe the transformation a reader experiences while becoming a reader or a writer. This genre of writing includes inspirational stories from famous thinkers like Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Amy Tan, Annie Dillard, and Anne Lamont. Composition students like mine are often required to read these literacy narratives and write their own. The informal question I initially asked students about their relationship to reading and writing primed them to compose their literacy narratives. What they wrote that first semester was pretty wide-ranging. Most students recall the affinities they felt toward reading when they were younger. Then they elaborate on how this feeling might have faded until they devoured J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series or something similar.<sup>16</sup> What set these pleasurable reading experiences apart for my students was that reading these books was optional and

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<sup>16</sup> J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

not required by the institution. In reading them, their posture was different, but I doubt they realized it.

A soccer player wrote the most haunting literacy narrative. He admitted that he did not enjoy reading and even made it through high school without finishing a book. You might think he felt some shame admitting this to someone devoting her life and brand new career to the subject of reading, but it did not seem that way. I detected a feeling of pride in his voice and later in his written literacy narrative. He managed to get by his teachers without reading a book and got into a decent college, which meant he subverted everything teachers and parents told him about what it takes to get into a good school. In his mind, the educational system was all a game. He almost wished the other team, his high school teachers, had played better. But, because he was advancing levels, he thought he was winning.

I have thought about my experience with that reluctant reader for a long time. I might not know the source of his apathy, but I suspect he would benefit from a reading practice focused on intrinsic instead of extrinsic motivation. In Daniel Pink's book *Drive*, he points to three qualities of intrinsic motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose.<sup>17</sup> These traits were evident in the students who enjoyed reading, even if it was *Harry Potter*. They had autonomy because they chose their reading material. They exercised mastery over the material since the reading level was within their abilities. Most would read the entire series and therefore have a grasp of the whole Harry Potter world. Their purpose was likely pleasure - profound delight in relating to a world not their own. After all, the

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<sup>17</sup>. Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (London: Penguin, 2011), 62.

stories are full of magic, witchcraft, love, family, friendship, and more. Readers could make connections, even fanciful ones, which was enough to motivate them to read. The soccer player's reluctance to read starkly contrasted with the experiences of most of my other students. However, if *Harry Potter* was the only source of enjoyment for most of my other students, there was still something lacking. I started to wonder what this means for required reading in educational settings.

The literary theorist Kenneth Burke asked similar questions about readers' role in his first book, *Counter-Statement*. He was critical of compulsory education that required citizens of a certain age to attend school. His concern was about passion because there were unseen effects of teaching the skill of reading to people who remained reluctant to read.

Had not the spread of literacy through compulsory education made readers of people who had no genuine interest in literature? Would not this group henceforth form the majority of the reading public? And would not good books pale into insignificance, not because they had fewer readers than in the past (they had more) but because an overwhelming army of bad readers had been recruited?<sup>18</sup>

The danger of compelling students to attend school and testing their academic performance along the way is that they never develop their will to read apart from the extrinsic motivators required by the institution. Educators do not facilitate reading programs that cultivate students' will or foster intrinsic motivation. As a result, the education system never develops readers. Students learn to filter information to answer

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1968), 69-70.

reading comprehension questions but do not know how to arrange that information for themselves.

Ten years later, students entering my classroom are not the same as they were that first semester. That single reluctant reader gaming the system and haunting my teaching dreams has multiplied. I have witnessed everything from low-quality work to outright plagiarism. These are not new. While these behaviors do not characterize every student, there remains strong resistance to reading among most students, while students who love to read are few. This should not surprise us, though. It is a consequence of an academic model built on extrinsic motivators like carrots and sticks. What reading provides, after all, is not the goal. At least, that is not what we communicate as educators when we teach to the test and emphasize the utility of a college degree. Readers are increasingly reluctant to read. This happens when reading is regarded as a tool for understanding human cognition instead of an act of perception.<sup>19</sup>

Psycholinguist and cognitive neuroscientist Mark Seidenberg studies the science of reading and describes reading as a tool for understanding human cognition.<sup>20</sup> In his 2017 book, *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It*, he contrasts the ease and rapidity with which humans acquire spoken language with the learning the complex skill of reading: “Reading is different: it is a technology, like radio, that came into existence because a person--or possibly several--had the insight to invent it.”<sup>21</sup> Seidenberg explores the visual activity of reading,

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, 13

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* 13.

precisely the idea that we read with our eyes.<sup>22</sup> He describes how readers build their visual acuity and increase their reading skills over time. For example, knowing the names of letters is followed by sounding them out. This is called phonemic awareness. A parent or caregiver reading aloud is followed by a child learning to read to themselves silently. At first, this consists of subvocalization, but as readers increase speed and whole word recognition, they vocalize fewer sounds in their heads.

Seidenberg identifies the rhetorical situation for his writing as the consistently underperforming schools in the U.S. combined with decreasing literacy rates among children and adults.<sup>23</sup> He offers teachers insights on how to guide developing readers into a fuller understanding of what they read. I contend that underperforming schools are a symptom of a deeper problem that plagues readers. The solution has little to do with acquiring skills to increase a reader's performance on a test designed to measure information stored in the short-term memory. Instead, the solution must offer an alternative approach to knowledge so that readers can integrate the interactions with what they read into their everyday lives. The problems associated with literacy are a symptom of an invisible enemy that has plagued epistemology for millennia: a static approach to knowledge instigated by the sight-intellect equation, making readers feel isolated and disconnected from what they read.

Who perpetuates this utilitarian approach to reading? My instinct is to look at how we approach reading, which often starts with our parents, caregivers, and educators' posture and how they talk about, model, and teach reading. In most cases, the way they approach

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid 15.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 5.

standards in education is a response to the foundation laid by the government. Let us consider motivation, for example. Educators seek to remedy the lack of motivation by emphasizing utility, which is tied to extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivators include trading grades for cognitive performance, often the illusion of cognitive performance. We tell students they must pass our classes to earn their degree and get a good job. Enjoy your carrot. I even recall teachers sharing statistics about the low reading level of incarcerated people—dodge that stick. Carrots, or the hope of a high-paying job, and sticks, the fear of becoming a criminal, do not create life-long readers. These strategies do nothing to demonstrate that reading is about forming relationships with knowledge. Those relationships create meaningful, life-changing experiences. On the other hand, approaches that emphasize utility encourage students to care more about grades and degrees than they do education. While a degree can be evidence of an educated individual, these are not synonymous.

Before I ditch the dry language of information and economics for the inspired lexicon of carnal hermeneutics, I want to acknowledge how my proposed method of reading will yield a higher return on investment because of compound interest. Let's turn from viewing reading as a strictly cognitive exercise to embracing an embodied approach to cognition. We open ourselves up to the many potentials reading has to offer us. Every reading experience always already happens in the body. Still, with a greater appreciation of embodied cognition, we can appreciate how interactive and integrative approaches to reading offer deposits in the form of associations, connections, and epiphanies that begin in wonder. This experience is deeply felt, and when we process the information of

feelings in the body, we increase the potential to connect with every new experience. Each layer of knowledge is a connection that strengthens our neural network, and every time we interact with phenomena, we add a new layer of understanding. This understanding leads to wisdom.

Approaching information as vibrant matter, alive instead of dead, moving instead of still, is how we change our orientation to information.<sup>24</sup> Reading always already implicates the body, and it is time we acknowledge that. We have to shift the focus from acquiring knowledge to interacting with phenomena. To see reading as interactivity is a huge adjustment. Reading is typically tied to sight, so it remains outside our bodies to be read from a distance. This is precisely what Plato feared when he equated writing with external memory. When we regard the book as externalized knowledge preserved from the mind of another, we tend to paralyze it, thinking it does not move. It is a container that communicates information, and that information is to be acquired. We can only ever react to it as a separate phenomenon when we do that. And what is the purpose of responding to external stimuli? What is the purpose of reading? Since its inception, reading is often regarded as a means to an end, and this end is often tied to economics. This orientation plagues more than educators. It enters into every area of our daily lives.

### **Resisting Fusion**

For the first time, alphabetic phonetic writing transformed the spoken word into a visual artifact.<sup>25</sup> Socrates critiqued writing's ability to objectify and externalize thought.

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<sup>24</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 110.

He recognized the potential to distance perceivers and phenomena and how this might inhibit the ability to remember. Plato's warnings readily describe the concerns within the information environment of our contemporary cultural moment. As a society, we are obsessed with information. We prioritize acquiring knowledge above other ways of knowing. While this ability has medicinal potential, we have not learned to ingest it in ways that might lead to healing and transformation. This kind of reading requires remembering. We extract information from phenomena we study without cultivating a relationship with the objects we perceive. The data remains outside of our bodies, which ultimately leads to forgetting. This forgetting forfeits any healing properties information might offer the reader. If we read to learn instead of live, we inhibit wisdom.

At the institutional level, educators advocate for a posture of reading that leads to extracting information from phenomena. This is called learning. This is more or less required because of how standardized tests measure progress in this area. California's State Board of Education publishes content standards for language arts for each grade level and foregrounds reading as a transaction. The third requirement for Kindergarteners requires five-year-olds to demonstrate that they "understand that printed materials provide information."<sup>26</sup> The emphasis on information is why reading comprehension is central to reading education. Standardized tests measure the amount of information taught and not forgotten.<sup>27</sup> This information is primarily factual or declarative knowledge and answers questions like who, what, where, and when. The brain stores this information in

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<sup>26</sup> California. Department of Education, *English-language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*, (1998).

<sup>27</sup> Valerie Strauss, "What do standardized tests actually test?," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/08/01/what-do-standardized-tests-actually-test/>.

short-term memory, another economic term called working memory.

When we design our tests to measure the amount of information a student knows as though it were capital being stored, we prioritize a focus on declarative knowledge, which cuts the learning process short. This approach prioritizes reading as a cognitive exercise instead of an existential experience. The problem here is that we strictly associate reading with getting information. We only need the information to answer questions on the standardized test designed to measure how much we have acquired. This transaction is not education. It is a futile process that leaves students feeling isolated, disconnected, and stagnant. More than that, it leads to forgetting the information acquired in the first place.

In George Orwell's *1984*, the citizens of Oceania must place all written documents in small chutes on their walls.<sup>28</sup> These openings are called memory holes and connect to an incinerator. The totalitarian government requires its citizens to erase external memories by throwing them away in these holes. This action is equivalent to the modern-day trashcan on any electronic device. What is striking is that this mandate is based on the same logic as our current educational system. These written documents are equated with history as well as memory. That is precisely what makes it so violating for the reader to witness citizens throw-away aspects of their individuality and free-thinking and the history of their culture. The absolute terror in this scene is that we equate memory with information.

Our current cultural crisis concerning information points to this same posture toward

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<sup>28</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classic, 1950), 38.

information. Instead of eliminating information, citizens are faced with the challenges of misinformation and disinformation, destabilizing the reader. This instability and confusion are why war continues to shift to the information environment.<sup>29</sup> The enemy sows seeds of discord and increases polarization within a culture, then apprehending information is no longer about what is true or false. When we focus entirely on designing information for better understanding or complicating it for war efforts, we misplace our priorities in education. When we approach reading as a means to an end, which is what we do when we focus on comprehending information, then we forfeit the transformative possibilities that information has the potential to offer. Not only that, but this approach is not adequate for learning. The information-heavy, short-term memories we make when reading a text are most frequently forgotten unless transferred to long-term memory. When we focus on information, we become obsessed with efficiency. Misinformation and disinformation are the most significant obstacles to reading efficiently as long as the goal is to acquire information. Learning this way becomes a transaction, and the payoff is cut short.

There is nothing wrong with the information. Whether that information communicates the amount of livestock a farmer has or instructs a child on where to hang their backpack, printed materials *do* provide information. This information is often helpful and inspires citizens to rebel against Big Brother. That usefulness is cut short when the standardized test is at the end of the line. To transfer information from our short-term working memory to our long-term memory, we must first process information

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<sup>29</sup> Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *Likewar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Eamon Dolan Books, 2018).

with our senses and integrate that experience into our lives. We do this by connecting to previous knowledge and experience, which is impossible when we stop at information as though building up an arsenal of facts is an end.

Daniel Willingham, a cognitive psychologist, and reading specialist, encourages educators to teach content knowledge to ensure reading comprehension.<sup>30</sup> He emphasizes the difference between reading to decode and reading to know the information the text communicates. Teaching more content to students provides more opportunities to situate the information they extract from a textbook. So Willingham suggests educators find ways to layer information to facilitate connections. This leads to a more robust understanding of the text and helps students remember what they read. Neuroscience affirms this. After all, neurons that fire together wire together. I agree with Willingham that we should prioritize connecting reading material to the complex neural network of knowledge we continuously construct throughout our lives. However, this alone is not enough.

We must recognize the body's role in meaning-making. Until we do, the information we take in is more likely to be forgotten. Why? Because we think information, and the language that communicates it, is an abstract, non-moving entity that we can manipulate, appropriate, and control. Instead of getting closer to the phenomena before us, we create totalizing systems or structures. We think that the more distance between ourselves and the phenomena we study, the more objectivity we have. When we regard information, language, and phenomena as abstract and distanced from our bodies in some mental

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 28.

space that has no connection to our bodies, we cannot touch them, attend to them, and integrate them into our lives in ways that will lead to personal transformation and result in wisdom.

Some educators have recognized the lack of payoff with a focus on information. As a result, they move to eliminate the distance with the text and advocate for immersive reading. Others encourage readers to practice identification. We think the more information we acquire, the better our chance of survival, but we forget that reception is only one part of the equation. The Italian writer, Umberto Eco, uses this transactional posture toward reading as the basis for the hyper-textual narrator of his 2004 novel, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. This book begins when the narrator wakes up from what feels like a long sleep. The doctor tending to the narrator, asks him, “what is your name?” In the first few pages of the novel, it is clear to the reader that everything he thinks is written in another text. The narrator responds, “My name is Arthur Gordyn Pym.”<sup>31</sup> The doctor tells him, “That is not your name.” So he tries again, “Call me Ishmael?” In a tragically funny way, all other memories of himself remain hidden, and his reading life becomes his identity. Instead of integrating books he has read into his life, he becomes them.

Eco’s narrator fuses his consciousness with the books he has read, which George Poulet advocates for in his article, “The Phenomenology of Reading.”<sup>32</sup> Poulet emphasizes the convergence of the reader and the text. For Poulet, the reader’s and the author’s consciousness both disappear, and the act of reading creates a new

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<sup>31</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1969): 57, doi:10.2307/468372.

consciousness. Poulet's work deliberately answers the claims of a field in a literary theory called New Criticism. Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument offered an approach to the text that they thought would provide a more rigorous approach to interpretation. In the aftermath of psychoanalysis, thinkers wondered how much a particular author's life might influence the story she had written. These influences include everything from the writer's historical context to their psychopathologies.

The problem with New Criticism is that we can never really know what the author intended, so our interpretation of the text is always just that: an interpretation. "The Intentional Fallacy" that Wimsatt and Beardsley write about complicates the reader's tendency to interpret the meaning of the text by assuming the author's intent.<sup>33</sup> They also took issue with giving readers the entirety of the interpreting power. Their conception of "The Affective Fallacy" complicates the reader's tendency to confuse the meaning of the text with the affective result it evokes.<sup>34</sup> In other words, they see danger in interpretations exclusively based on feelings. Hoping to bring the study of literature under the same rigors of measurement that catapulted science to the forefront of education in the centuries following the enlightenment, Wimsatt and Beardsley conceived of a system in which the study of literature would be verifiable and repeatable. In their pursuit of objective meaning, they isolated the text from the author and reader.

This is the conversation that George Poulet joins when he establishes the idea that the reader and the book share a consciousness. Understandably, Poulet is unwilling to dismiss

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<sup>33</sup> W. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "11. 'The Intentional Fallacy'," *Authorship*, 2019, doi:10.1515/9781474465519-013.

<sup>34</sup> Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (1949): 31–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27537883>.

the reader's importance as a crucial participant in the reading process. He wants to simultaneously celebrate the power of the book to communicate what was in the author's mind. For Poulet, this convergence is a meeting between the consciousness of the reader and the consciousness of the author that is only activated through the experience of reading. He suggests that when I read, "I live, from the inside, in a certain identity in the work and the work alone." The subject/object dichotomy of reader and text disappears. According to Poulet, "the subjective principle which I call *I*, is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my *I*." This perspective was dismissed early on because it seemed only to extend the project of new criticism. New Criticism privileges the text, while Poulet's ideas privilege reading. In both articulations, the reader and the author disappear.

So if we follow this logic and dismiss the idea that a text can embody the author's consciousness only to be activated by the reader, does that mean the text is as static as the etymology of literature suggests, or is there an alternate path that we might pursue? German literary scholar Wolfgang Iser offers an alternative course in *The Act of Reading* with a significant shortcoming I intend to overcome.<sup>35</sup> He develops a response method for the reader that celebrates a phenomenological approach to the text. Along with Poulet, Iser is one of the first thinkers to adapt Edmund Husserl's account of phenomenology to the subject of reading. He advances the work of Husserl by integrating the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and navigates the interchange between phenomena that are visible and invisible. Iser acknowledges, "Reading is not a direct 'internalization,'

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<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1980).

because it is not a one-way process, and our concern will be to find means of describing the reading process as a dynamic interaction between text and reader.”<sup>36</sup> He posits what he calls “a wandering viewpoint” to emphasize the way the reader never reads from the same space twice. This movement through space demands a dynamic way of reading and navigating a text. Meaning, for Iser, is not hidden in the text waiting to be discovered. Meaning is an event that occurs when the text and reader converge. This idea communicates the reader’s presence in the text is a spatio-temporal experience that allows her to recall memories and embed them into her present reading experience. The dynamism comes as the reader makes new and ever-changing connections between their personal experience and the text.

The problem with Iser’s model is that this dynamism only exists on the reader’s part - never the text itself. Instead of appreciating the text as vibrant matter, or a living presence, the way Jane Bennett might, Iser regards the text as fixed. For Iser, the stars in the literary text are fixed, but the lines we draw between them vary.<sup>37</sup> Part of the problem is how he uses the stars metaphor. The stars, for Iser, are a metaphor for the image of thought evoked in the reader’s mind during the act of reading. The lines drawn between these images create the narrative of the story. This is precisely where interpretation varies in Iser’s model, and this dynamism was both positive and productive. The problem is that two people reading the same text will rarely imagine the same picture, which means the images are never fixed in the first place. Iser’s motivation in making this claim was similar to the New Critics we discussed earlier, but the problem is much older. To study

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<sup>36</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 107.

<sup>37</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): xx, doi:10.2307/468316.

literature, it was thought that something - the reader, the text, or the images evoked by the reading process *had* to be fixed. Even a psychoanalytic approach to the text requires readers to interpret symbols based on culturally agreed-upon meanings. This eventually led to the kind of paranoid reading that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sought to remedy. This approach to reading complicates epistemic paralysis - the idea that what we know is static, determined, or constant. Still, focusing on the reader as the sole creator limits the interpretive possibilities hidden in language.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers a corrective to the fusion that Poulet champions by insisting that the participant remains critically engaged in the perceptive act to discern differences and relate with them as coconspirators in the perceptive act. His argument starts with a correction to Henri Bergson's articulation of memory that surely influenced Poulet's notion of phenomenological reading:

Bergson's error is believing that the meditating subject could merge with the object which he is meditating, or that knowledge could expand by merging with being. The error of reflective philosophies is believing that the meditating subject could absorb the object into his meditation or grasp the object upon which he is meditating without remainder, or that our being reduces down to our knowledge. As the meditating subject, we are never the unreflective subject whom we seek to know; but no more can we become entirely conscious, nor reduce ourselves to transcendental consciousness.<sup>38</sup>

Instead of conflating ourselves with the phenomena we perceive, we relate to it. This

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<sup>38</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Psychology Press, 2002), 63-64.

relational ontology allows us to apprehend differences and feel vibrations between colors, sounds, metaphors, and the image of thought. These differences are the very material of our life experiences.

Recent conversations in cognitive neuroscience complicate Poulet's perspective in ways I consider essential for our contemporary moment. Specifically, they conclude that there is no consciousness outside of the human, or in our case, the reader. Alva Noë describes consciousness as life in his book *Out of Our Heads*. Consciousness is a result of dynamic interactions and relations with the world. Instead of consciousness describing our internal cognitive processes, Noë argues that consciousness is something we do.<sup>39</sup> He considers consciousness more like dancing than digestion to illustrate this point.<sup>40</sup> He says we look for consciousness in the wrong place if we look for it in the brain.<sup>41</sup> Instead, we need to widen our conception of consciousness beyond the brain to include our active lives and the world around us. This means that consciousness is not only about signals the brain receives but about life lived in the world. In other words, the lived human experience.

Noë's work influenced the neuroscientist Christof Koch's most recent work, *The Feeling of Life Itself*. In this book, Koch defines consciousness as experience.<sup>42</sup> Koch questions whether artificial intelligence can be conscious. This question is hidden in a theoretical posture like Poulet's. Articulating consciousness as experience and echoing

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<sup>39</sup> Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), xii.

<sup>40</sup> Noë, *Out of Our Heads*, xii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid* 65.

<sup>42</sup> Christof Koch, *The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness Is Widespread but Can't Be Computed* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 1.

Noë's view that consciousness is life means neither a computer nor a book can be conscious. He confines conscious experience to sensing creatures who participate in life. This logic implicates everything from plants to the Octopus as conscious. Following this logic challenges Poulet's conclusions in important ways. If consciousness requires participation, then we cannot define the act of reading as a new or third consciousness separate from the reader and the book. Reading is about interactivity, and it takes place in the relationship between the reader and her text. Our orientation to the phenomena we interact with is the difference between reading for life or reading for death.

Reading requires an inclination to information necessary whether a person is reading great books or has the great books immediately accessible with a neuro link. Readers then interact with the information before integrating it into their lives. This is what it takes to read toward life. Before we get too far, let me clarify that information is not the problem. The problem is with our orientation to information as phenomena. We seek to acquire information as though that acquisition were the goal. We think reading is a one-way process; its sole purpose is to extract information. Information becomes a commodity to be acquired to enhance pleasure and avoid pain; consequently, reading becomes a tool for extraction. The American novelist, David Markson, cautions against this posture in his 1996 novel, *Reader's Block*.<sup>43</sup> The protagonist, Reader, plans to write a novel. His attempts are futile, and it becomes clear that he has not digested anything he has ever read. He has stockpiled information, and when he attempts to create his own story, he can only regurgitate lines and quotes from what he has read. He has not integrated the

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<sup>43</sup> David Markson, *Reader's Block* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996).

information into his life. Reading depends on our ability to integrate the information and phenomena in a way that starts with wonder and leads to wisdom.

### **Revisiting Arrangement**

The dictionary defines reading as “the action or skill of reading written or printed materially silently or aloud.”<sup>44</sup> This is primarily how reading is understood. Reading is currently taught through acts of reception and decoding and leads to appropriation. A book represents thought, written down, mechanically reproduced, and brought to us via a small padded envelope containing approximately 300 pages. In recent years, 7 or 8 megabytes and a 10-second download to our 9x7 inch tablet deliver a book, prompting readers to question what a book is and what we do when we read it. For most readers, experiencing a text is a dance between phonics and decoding, but we don’t read with our eyes; we read with our consciousness which implicates our entire sensory apparatus: our minds and bodies.

It might surprise you that the earliest conceptions of the transitive verb *read* had nothing to do with the visual process by which a person apprehended a text. There were spatial, temporal, and material components to the idea of reading. Early on, the concept of reading had more to do with how someone organized what they apprehended and less to do with decoding marks on a surface. These early associations of the word *read* convey connotations of my favorite rhetorical canon: arrangement.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Oxford Languages and Google - English | Oxford Languages." Oxford Languages | The Home of Language Data. Last modified May 20, 2020. <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>.

<sup>45</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “read (v.),” accessed February 22, 2020. <https://www-oed-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/>

Arrangement requires an informed orator to deliver an effective speech. In oral and written composition, the arrangement comes from ordering the text for maximum persuasion. Persuasion, here, is not a dirty word; it merely implies effective communication. Communication in this regard carries a component of judgment or discernment. That means reading, as initially considered, is the ability to practice discernment and offer counsel: "to advise, counsel, persuade; discuss, deliberate; rule, guide; arrange, equip; forebode; read, explain; learn by reading; put in order."<sup>46</sup> To discern means judging a situation by detecting nuance to reach a fuller understanding of a text and communicate that to a neighbor. This requires perception, and perception always implicates the body. Readers apprehend textual details alongside environmental influences. We piece these together in the form of narration, not just an interpretation. Narration offers readers the power to judge the importance and significance of phenomena they read instead of searching for a one-to-one correspondence based on a system of identification. Communication is critical, and this is why I emphasize relating narratives.

Reading was initially conceived of as an arrangement that resulted in effective communication. How has that changed in our contemporary cultural moment? Typical associations with reading insist that reading takes place in isolation, especially once a child learns to read. This is a tragedy. Our contemporary understanding of the word *read* communicates the idea that the mind receives the written text through sight or touch, followed by connecting sounds to letters. The science of reading is the most studied

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<sup>46</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, "read (v.)."

aspect of a child's education, but what is specifically studied is one tiny star in the constellation of reading. Cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists lead these efforts, shouting from the mountain top what research repeatedly demonstrates: we are not born wired to read. Talk, yes, but read - never. Well, eventually, but only after careful instruction. Brain scientists agree that reading is a learned skill, but how reading instruction should be delivered is the subject of what child educators refer to as the reading wars.

Rudolf Flesch, an advocate for speaking in plain English and co-founder of the Flesch-Kincaid readability metric, led the war efforts on one front. Flesch thought phonics is the best method for teaching a child to read; after all, sounding out letters is how we come to read new words. Phonemic awareness allows a child to blend sounds to make words. A child matches their knowledge of a word with the sound that letters make, called decoding. The problem is that phonics doesn't always work because language is tricky, and we have many non-phonetic words like *friend* and *sugar*. This is why Horace Mann thought children should read by recognizing words. This is called the whole word method. Mann was one of the earliest public education advocates and was responsible for establishing the state board of education in the United States. He brought the whole word method back from Europe. The cause was later taken up by John Dewey, an education reformer known for pragmatism. Born from Mann's whole word method, early childhood educators now offer lists of sight words for parents to reinforce with their children. The goal of both educational philosophies is to increase literacy. This means that whether a child sounds out a word or recognizes it, reading is not finished until the meaning is

made. Literacy requires words to make sense at the level of the sentence. Sense here is not about the body but logic. It has everything to do with acquiring information deemed to be valid. Literacy, then, is measured by a person's reading comprehension when tested in isolation.

Reading in isolation leads to several problems, including a desire to control the text. These have roots in the sight-intellect equation, which plagues thinking and reading for various reasons. Because we strongly associate what we know with what we have seen, we spend time classifying and dividing knowledge to communicate it better. This paves the road to reading's most dominant place in the humanities: literary criticism. With all of the emphasis on reading for discernment, there is no reason that order has to reach its fulfillment in analysis and criticism.

If life is enriched through creative activities, perhaps there is a way to pursue a creative reading practice that celebrates the reader's ability to create while simultaneously fortifying the reader's experience of the text. My dissertation aims to develop a creative reading practice for these adult learners and college students that achieves this end. What I demonstrate in my dissertation is how to read in a way that does not rely on extracting information from a text. Reading with a posture of inclination toward life means we must make meaning. We must consider our texts as more than just depositories for information. The text is a complex organism, an entire life-world, and a galaxy. A text helps us to understand our world as well as ourselves. If we stop at information, we only read for utility, perpetuating meaningless lives. Suppose we relate what we read to our own lives in a more purposeful and integrative way. In that case, our reading experiences and life

experiences will offer mutual transformation and the felt sense of aliveness that leads to a long-lasting joy. To achieve this end, I provide an ecological approach to reading that leads to mutual transformation and results in human flourishing.

### **Expanding Knowledge**

In Mark Z. Danielewski's experimental novel *House of Leaves*, a character named Reston feels sea sick because of the changing, shifting nature of the house. Like the book's experimental layout, the house in its pages is a labyrinth. Some characters believe that the house's mutations reflect the psychology of its visitors.<sup>47</sup> In a provocative passage, a writer named Ruby Dahl calls the house "a solipsistic heightener" because the lack of sensory information force visitors to project their data and experience onto the house. This suggests that the strange creatures in the house come from the visitors' psyches, not the house itself. Danielewski plays with the tension between mind and body by emphasizing how the felt sense of time and space always implicates the body. When memories are primarily visual instead of multi-sensory, we experience cognitive dissonance and doubt the validity of the memories altogether.

When revisiting places we once frequented as children, it is not unusual to observe how much smaller everything seems. This experience has too often been attributed to the physical differences between a child and an adult. In fact it has more to do with epistemological dimensions: knowledge is hot water on wool. It shrinks time and space.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 165.

<sup>48</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 167.

Solipsism is one of the most dominant criticisms of phenomenology - the idea that if we only focus on what is felt or our subjective perception, then we reject the possibility of objective truth. This passage reveals an even more significant threat to the pursuit of truth than solipsism, which is the idea of truth itself.

When we trace human communication through time, we witness a significant transition in the ways cultural memories are preserved. The most significant shift took place between what is referred to as primary orality and the era of early literacy. Primary orality describes a time when cultures from one generation transmit tradition to the next through dynamic bodily gestures like spoken word, dance, or singing. Literacy references how written inscriptions on clay tablets afford cultures more static preservation possibilities. The stasis that results poses an even more significant threat to the pursuit of truth than solipsism, which from memory suddenly seeming to stand still has detrimental consequences for epistemology.

The invention of writing contributes to *truth* transitioning through time and across Greek and Roman cultures, from *Aletheia* to *veritas* to *certitudo*. At the same time, reading is primarily considered a response to writing. As truth transitions, reading and writing are tied to sight. This association cements the sight-intellect equation, which has two related problems: knowledge is mainly associated with what we see, and once we write it down, knowledge never moves. Consequently, the rise in literacy stifles intellectual thought because of its ties to sight, and what we see represented in writing is seemingly paralyzed.

Martin Heidegger traces how truth transforms over time from the early Greek thinkers

to the modern-day. He delivered his findings to the University of Freiburg during the winter of 1942-43, and his lectures formed the work we know as *Parmenides*. He explains that the Greek word for truth is *Aletheia*, which translates to *unconcealedness* or *unhiddenness* and implies forgetting. The person forgets because they are no longer with the truth. In other words, the truth is that which is not forgotten but is also inherently spatial. The truth was associated with deception, it meant from the right way and path, and when it was forgotten, a man was “away” from it. The word “way” is borrowed from the word “method” in Greek, but this is not the scientific method or a means of investigation and research. Heidegger explains, "Way" is not "stretch" in the sense of remotiveness or distance between two points and so itself a multiplicity of points.”<sup>49</sup> The idea carries the notions of per-spect and pro-spect, or more simply, distance and time. The truth is not only that which is not forgotten but carries the idea of *being with* phenomena in space and time. This changed as the word truth evolved to communicate something more rigid.

Heidegger describes the articulation of the Latin word *veritas* and how it came to be associated with the beliefs of orthodox Christians and further evolved into the notion of right or correct. The root, *ver*, means to be or keep steady - in other words, not to fall (no *falsum*), remain above, maintain oneself, keep one’s head up, be the head, and command. From there, *verum*, instead of *falsum*, “received the sense of established right.” What’s odd, and Heidegger is careful to point this out, is how closely this relates to the Latin word *veru*, a gate or door that carries the idea of shutting off or closing. This is the

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 59.

opposite of the Greek word for truth, *Aletheia*, which is the idea of dis-closing and dis-covering. In other words, the truth used to communicate an opening and was associated with the proximity in space and time, allowing for phenomena we study to change and evolve. Veritas has nothing to do with unconcealment but communicates the concept of “being above” and is associated with *rectitude*, which means “correctness.” The transition from *Aletheia* to *veritas* eventually turned to *certitudo* and now implies something that can be verified. The consequences of this were detrimental to our pursuit of wonder and wisdom. The move from a dynamic approach to knowledge to a more static conception of truth gave Christians something to die for but gave humanity nothing to live for.

Traditionally, this is how the very first speech act is regarded in the early chapters of Genesis. Naming the animals constituted a kind of paralysis, according to Hegel.<sup>50</sup> Once the skin and flesh of the animal were given a name, its linguistic expression preceded the living reality. In other words, the map preceded the territory. Not only did this articulation paralyze the animals, or so it was thought, but it also gave humans a sense of ownership and dominion over the animals. At least, this is how the naming account in Genesis is typically read.<sup>51</sup> The etymology of the word “text” points to a richness that is both hard to ignore and is essential for my articulation of reading. In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong discusses the link between music and oral culture.<sup>52</sup> The word *rhapsody* means to stitch songs together, and the word *text* comes from the root word that translates “to weave.”

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<sup>50</sup> Hegel, *Jenenser Realphilosophie*, cited in Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 19).

<sup>51</sup> I offer an alternative reading via Jean Louis Chretien in a later section.

<sup>52</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 20.

Ong recognizes that the word text has more in common with oral culture than literate culture because the etymology of literature refers to letters. Over time, these letters became increasingly distanced from what they symbolized, which was initially the animate world.

As truth was in the early stages of this transition, a concurrent shift occurred between orality and literacy, resulting in another complex change in human consciousness. Knowledge stood still, but it also came inside for the first time. Eric Havelock's *The Muse Learns to Write* explores how our awareness of consciousness, precisely the feeling of interiority, strengthens with the invention of writing.<sup>53</sup> Alexander the Great famously illustrates the transition between orality and literacy. Reading was always done aloud for a long time, and he dazzled his troops by silently reading a letter from his mother in 330 BC.<sup>54</sup> Reading was suddenly internal instead of exclusively external. Internal reading opens up possibilities for knowledge acquisition, but it also ties reading to cognition and fortifies the sight-intellect equation.

Aside from emphasizing how our perception of space is altered by time and complicating how memories are experienced, the *House of Leaves* passage referencing childhood comments on how acquiring knowledge contracts the sense of space and time. Knowledge is associated with contracting consciousness through altering memory. In the novel, the memories are sight-based instead of felt experiences. The kind of knowledge shrinks time and space is derived through visual observations or the sense of sight. The critique, then, is with equating what we know with what we see. Clearly a plan for

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<sup>53</sup> Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

<sup>54</sup> Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Penguin, 2014), 86.

Danielewski; after all, he makes the character Zampano blind as an homage to the magnificent writers: Homer, Milton, and Jorge Luís Borges. These historical, literary figures expand the world without sight, challenging the privileging of seeing as the primary way of knowing.

When reading is associated with *just* a visual experience, it is most dominantly associated with the cognitive realm. Cognition is typically associated with sight, still thought of as separate from the body and never shared. Political philosopher Hannah Arendt comments on how rare it is for philosophers to confront bodily sensations because that would require a recognition that they are not just in the world but of the world. “Nothing perhaps is more surprising in this world of ours,” she writes, “than the almost infinite diversity of its appearances, the sheer entertainment value of its views, sounds, and smells, something that is hardly ever mentioned by the thinkers and philosophers.”<sup>55</sup> Sadly, experiences are rarely the focus of careful consideration unless they present themselves through the sense of sight.

Reading loses vitality under the tyranny of sight. Vision tends to amplify cognition’s import while felt experience is neglected. I do not discount the gifts sight gives readers, but there is a need to think, read, and live with a fuller spectrum of sensory experiences. With this need comes an increase in sensory input and a need to interpret these bodily experiences to grasp their deep meanings. The relationship between reading and writing fortifies the correlation between sight and intellect to the extent that contemporary thinkers rarely question it. Rachel McCann, who advocates for an embodied experience

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<sup>55</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 20.

of architecture, only reinforces the problem when she critiques reading to privilege embodied experience: “Vision and language have traditionally been the primary vehicles through which western culture seeks to domesticate the sensuous world, and architectural pedagogy has long been complicit in this effort, training architects to produce buildings to be read and interpreted rather than experienced.”<sup>56</sup> While I agree with McCann that architecture would benefit from a more embodied approach, reading is not her opposition. The ontologies of reading and architecture suffer from similar sight-oriented epistemologies, but interacting with a book, just like a building, is always an embodied experience. We have lost touch with this reality just like we have lost the inherent dynamism in the concept of truth.

When we began writing down thoughts to make them visible, we started almost exclusively associating what we know with what we see. This is called the sight-intellect equation. The sight-intellect equation is partially responsible for our problematic approach to reading. We can better understand that when we see how consciousness evolves with the rise in literate cultures. Walter J. Ong discusses the sight-intellect equation in *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Human Consciousness and Culture* with profound reservation.<sup>57</sup> He points to the limitations of equating what we know with what we see and acknowledges how deeply embedded the association of sight and knowing is in our language. More words carry the residue of the sight-intellect equation than words that connote kinesthetic or aural associations. Ong even advocates

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<sup>56</sup> Rachel McCann, "On the Hither Side of Depth: A Pedagogy of Engagement", *Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology* 16, no. 3 (n.d.), 69.

<sup>57</sup> Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, 121.

trading the term “world view” with “world sense.”<sup>58</sup> The point is that knowing is more than seeing and includes several other senses. This is what McCann is after when she advocates for a more embodied architectural experience.

German philologist Bruno Snell traces the sight-intellect equation to earlier roots in his profound exploration of early Greek thinking called *The Discovery of the Mind*. Snell explains that for the Greek poet Homer, ideas are conveyed through the *noos*, a mental organ analogous to the eye; consequently, "to know" is not just "to see" but "to have seen."<sup>59</sup> Seeing is not about the function of the eye but what results from the activity of thinking.<sup>60</sup> This distinction between the stand-alone verb and the past participle is essential. The past participle “to have seen” invokes the possibilities of knowledge and the potential for wisdom that stems from our participation in the world. Readers might hear echoes of *Aletheia* and the importance of being in proximity to phenomena we observe. Snell explains, "The eye, it appears, serves as Homer's model for the absorption of experiences. From this point of view, the intensive coincides with the extensive: he who has seen much sufficiently often possesses intensive knowledge."<sup>61</sup> The phrase “intensive knowledge” points to a deeply felt and embodied sense of knowing. This kind of knowledge is impossible without connection; connections are made through forming relationships with our experiences.

Reading is how we relay what is external to the mind’s interior. This relay is what makes insight possible. Ong invokes Bernard Lonergan’s work *Insight* to highlight the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid 139.

<sup>59</sup> Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind* (North Chelmsford: Courier Corporation, 2012), 13.

<sup>60</sup> Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid 18.

problematic relationship between knowing and seeing:

Now, if human knowing is to be conceived exclusively, by an epistemological necessity, as similar to ocular vision, it follows as a first consequence that human understanding must be excluded from human knowledge. For understanding is not like seeing. Understanding grows with time: you understand one point, then another, and a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and your understanding changes several times until you have things right. Seeing is not like that, so that to say that knowing is like seeing is to disregard understanding as a constitutive element in human knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

Loneragan and Ong rightly question this long-standing relationship between sight and the intellect. The way we currently apprehend the relationship between knowing and seeing has lost the nuance it started with. Seeing takes place in the instant, whereas knowledge or understanding is a culmination of observing and relating life experiences.

Despite the emphasis on proximity for Snell, the phrase “intensive knowledge” that Snell uses can be read in two ways. The first way points to the number of experiences of a subject akin to information that we stockpile in the brain. Information in Snell’s case comes from observation and experience. This proximity is no longer necessary for acquiring data in our information-saturated environment. Information is obtained apart from observation or experience. Although there is a recognition that a higher quantity of experiences positively influences knowledge, experiences interacting with phenomena in close proximity and abundant information are not the same.

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<sup>62</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 131.

Reading a book is just like visiting a building. The experience takes place across space and through time. My concern with reading is similar to architect Alberto Perez Gomez's concerns that architecture suffered when it became more firmly associated with fine arts. He outlines his concerns as follows:

Buildings became "objects to be experienced "out of time" as dispassionate, beautiful, "compositions," or, at best, in the linear time of voyeuristic criticism or tourism, as keenly reported by visitors to ancient ruins during the 1700s; experience became aesthetic "judgment," connecting to emotions as mental associations, effectively bypassing kinesthetic bodily senses and explaining its effects through Cartesian psychology.<sup>63</sup>

Perez Gomez traces the decline in meaningful architecture to the perceived disconnection between mind and body on the visitor's part. The visitor and the reader are responsible for the posture toward the text, whether that text is a book or a building. Even though this dissertation argues for a new orientation to reading, I am sympathetic to McCann's critique of reading. After all, reading, like architecture, is predominantly associated with the sense of sight.

When we read a book, like studying the rings of a tree trunk or a constellation in the night sky, we do so to form relationships with the phenomena before us. We develop relationships with other areas of our lives by attending to and cultivating these connections with the phenomena. These relationships are the material of our memories. This kind of reading is seeing, but not the sight that Ong and Lonergan critique. This

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<sup>63</sup> Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 153.

seeing is closer to what French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty had in mind when he said seeing is a kind of touch. A perceptual unfolding occurs when we read, allowing the reader to be read in return. When we apprehend a text by foregrounding touch, the reader experiences a rich intertwining between perceiver and phenomena. It is always already bodily.

So what does it take to experience language this way? Merleau-Ponty describes language as “the bond between flesh and the idea,” so attending to the relationship between these is the first step toward experiencing this connection more fully. Observing phenomena changes over time and through space is the first step in forming relationships. Although my priority aligns with Lonergan and Ong in challenging the correlation between sight and intellect, like Merleau-Ponty, I recognize that sight has synaesthetic potential. We make meaning with our senses. Mind and body are regarded as separate; knowledge, thought, and memory are all assumed to be immaterial. Eventually, this correlation between sight and knowledge made it a priority to reject the body altogether. This is a loss we have yet to process fully. Our pursuit of knowledge used to be so intimately tied to the natural world.

Reading is the act that makes interiority possible. Still, in internalizing consciousness through the written word as the mediator, readers grew increasingly distanced from their external world of perception. The marks of the alphabet began with direct correlations to natural phenomena, but these early associations were lost with time and use. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram discusses the first letter of the alphabet, aleph, the ancient Hebrew word for ox, and how it was written to depict the appearance of the animal’s

head with horns: ∇ (with a tilt).<sup>64</sup> When you flip it upside down, or what I consider right side up, we have the first letter of our *alphabet* but none of the rich history that this sign carries.

Abram's concern, which I share, is that the disconnect between signifier and signified means natural phenomena begin to lose their voices.<sup>65</sup> The result is that the reader's relationship to any given text loses its dynamic connection to the living world. We apprehend a text as though it stands still instead of embracing it as a living, moving entity. Not only that, but our primary and often only experience with a text is within the interior space that is made possible instead of attuning our internal experience to the exterior world. When we exclusively associate reading with mental phenomena, we lose the dynamism of the living world that envelops the text. Readers navigate through the world, apprehending layers of meaning as they consider each text with every other.

A beautiful example of this dynamic intimacy was written into the fabric of classical education. In the *Convivio*, Dante correlates classical education's model of the Trivium and Quadrivium to the seven spheres of knowledge, the visible planets, and heavenly bodies. Each sphere of knowledge expands based on the relationship between the myths associated with the planets.

- Grammar corresponds to the sphere of the moon
- Dialectics corresponds to the planet Mercury
- Rhetoric corresponds to the planet Venus
- Arithmetic corresponds to the sphere of the sun

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<sup>64</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 101.

<sup>65</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 101.

- Music corresponds to the planet Mars
- Geometry corresponds to the planet Jupiter
- Astronomy corresponds to the planet Saturn

Early humanists regarded the stars as instruments in the hands of God. Eventually, there was a resistance to this thinking before it became a flat-out rejection. The reason for this rejection might surprise you. Rene Descartes is often blamed for advocating for the separation between mind and matter, the body being associated with the latter. Before Descartes, a renaissance thinker, Marsilio Ficino, advocated for this separation. He both affirmed and rejected the power of the stars, mostly because he wanted to resist the "evil power of Saturn," the ascendant of his astrological horoscope.<sup>66</sup> He accepted that astrology, or planetary energies, might influence the body, but he insisted it had no control over the mind or the will. In other words, this thinker's actual belief in the stars and their relationship to his physical body led to his initial resistance and eventual rejection. Moreover, studying the stars influenced the conceptual separation of mind and body.

As we incline ourselves to the phenomena before us, around us, behind us, and above us, we bend ourselves to the expansive possibilities of meaning-making.

Indigenous ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the journey: "When botanists go walking the forests and fields looking for plants, we say we are going on a foray. When writers do the same, we should call it metaphoray, and the land is rich in both."<sup>67</sup> The

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<sup>66</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 99-100.

<sup>67</sup> Robin W. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 46.

book is a container of words, which are containers of energy. The poetic imagination creates structures from the material Paul Valéry says is familiar to poets and philosophers: language.<sup>68</sup> We enter into a relationship with the book by reading it with a fuller sense of awareness that our body is altered in the process - not just our body but our body in the world. Andreas Weber, the author of *The Biology of Wonder*, reminds us of something similar: “We do not experience the world primarily with our minds but with our senses and our bodies - and the consequence of this connection in the flesh is that we perceive the world not as a causal chain reaction but as a vast field of meaning. Human beings think in symbols and metaphors. Mind is meaning as well.”<sup>69</sup> Poetic reveries stem from material realities. How do we appreciate the particularities of these realities and the experiences that create them?

While what is seen still emphasizes what is visible, it carries an even greater emphasis on experience -- all kinds of sensory experiences. Ong’s appreciation of Lonergan reminds the reader that intellectual work is a process that leads to understanding. Understanding is knowledge. Although intuition, like reading, might be traced to an instant, to borrow French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s term, reading is a synthesizing exercise that requires harmony. The reading process involves movement--a becoming. Ong reminds his readers that the process of intellectual work includes more than sight: sensory knowing and kinesthetic knowing are intricate parts of philosophical knowledge. The problem with the sight-intellect equation is even more complicated: “To say that “knowing is like seeing” is also to rob knowledge of its interiority.” This

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Valéry, *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1950).

<sup>69</sup> Andreas Weber, *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling and the Metamorphosis of Science* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2016), 6.

interiority is what we call consciousness and can be understood as awareness.

There is no interiority without the felt correspondence with the exterior world. We must recognize how change is implicated in our being in the world. This is not to deny duration altogether. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is an anchor for the world.<sup>70</sup> This anchor might keep the boat from venturing too far away from one physical location, but the beauty of the anchor is that the ship continues to rock on the water's surface. The anchor is never lowered to keep us permanently in one spot. We raise it back up to continue on the path of observation, moving over the surface of the deep. The reader is a wayfinder, navigating with the stars and moving over the constantly undulating surface. The waves continue to rock, and the world continues to move. Instead of getting seasick with the movement, we can open our eyes to a different kind of seeing as we experience the boat's gentle rocking.

Reading is an ongoing correspondence between reader and phenomena, and the result is a carefully constructed, constantly changing narrative. Each time a reader corresponds with her text, they exchange energy. As a result, both participants leave the encounter altered. When this experience is shared between readers, we cultivate humanity. Rest assured, humanity is not some vague term for culture. The word human stems from *homo*, meaning "man," and *humus*, meaning "earth." We cultivate humanity and fortify our relationship with the earth.

When I consider the best ways to demonstrate the full-bodied, multisensory reading I have in mind, the most fruitful examples are attending to weather patterns and the

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<sup>70</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Psychology Press, 2002), 144.

microevolution of natural phenomena. This is because we develop the capacity to participate in material phenomena by noticing the change in seasons, tracing rock formations, or logging the rise and fall of ocean tides. In our contemporary cultural moment, we explain these natural phenomena by giving these patterns names like Winter, erosion, or even gravity. It starts with reading the vibrant matter that makes up the earth, including language. In other words, and in every way, *reading matters*. It is through approaching reading as an act of perception that requires material and movement that we might rescue books from oblivion and cultivate humanity. In the following chapter, I will clarify the body's role in meaning making.

### **Bated Breath**

“To be creative, a person must exist and have a feeling of existing, not in conscious awareness, but as a basic place to operate from. Creativity is then the doing that arises out of being. It indicates that he who is, is alive.”

Donald Winnicott, *Living Creatively*<sup>71</sup>

While pursuing an answer to how I might help my students recover a love for reading, I came across the contemporary writer and bio-philosopher Andreas Weber's 2019 book, *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics of the Anthropocene*. In a sobering moment at the beginning of the book, the author describes the rise of mental health problems and points to a prediction from the World Health Organization that depression will rank as the leading cause of global burden and disease by 2030.<sup>72</sup> In his eyes, depression relates to

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<sup>71</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, *Home is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 39.

<sup>72</sup> Andreas Weber, *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: MIT Press,

not feeling alive anymore.

Weber considers the decline in this felt sense of vitality a consequence of disconnection, distance, and isolation. He labels this predicament “the ideology of death.”<sup>73</sup> This opened my eyes to the source of my students’ problems with reading. If the WHO is right and depression is increasing worldwide, my students’ apathy toward reading is only a fraction of a much bigger picture. If what I perceived as apathy presented as depression and was rooted in the feelings of disconnection, distance, and isolation, how could I foster and facilitate reading instruction that offers something different? How might I pursue the kind of reading that emphasizes connection, proximity, and relationship?

I assigned an excerpt of Weber’s 2019 manifesto *Enlivenment* to my composition students for the past few years. They read the introduction of this book in the first week of class. Including it in my syllabus encourages my students to wrestle with what it means to feel alive. I place Weber alongside Ray Bradbury’s 1951 short story, “Rocket Man.”<sup>74</sup> Anthologized in *The Illustrated Man* collection and written 19 years before Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon, Bradbury likens the Rocket Man in this story to a soldier leaving for battle. The call of duty to one’s country is notably absent. A kind of existential angst felt by the father rises to the surface. It prompts the reader to question what it means to live a meaningful life. Despite the Rocket Man’s love for his wife and son, he leaves again and again as though gravity reverses its pull and calls him back to the infinite possibilities in the open sky.

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2019), 20-21.

<sup>73</sup> Weber, *Enlivenment*, 19-50.

<sup>74</sup> Ray Bradbury, *The Illustrated Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

What Weber calls the ideology of death sets the mood of the story.<sup>75</sup> This story is so powerful because the rocket man does not die when his rocket is swallowed by the sun. He lives half of his life already dead. He never looks at the sky and barely glances at his wife or son when he returns home. Of all things, he keeps his feet on the ground and his hands in the dirt by gardening. He does this with what reads like desperation.

There he was with his long dark arms moving swiftly, planting, tamping, fixing, cutting, pruning, his dark face always down to the soil, his eyes always down to what he was doing, never up to the sky, never looking at me, or Mother, even, unless we knelt with him to feel the earth soak up through the overalls at our knees, to put our hands into the black dirt and not look at the bright, crazy sky.

Then he would glance at either side, to Mother or me, and give us a gentle wink, and go on, bend down, face down, the sky staring at his back.<sup>76</sup>

It is no wonder the rocket man's wife regards him as dead. She anticipates the future tragedy that her husband's dangerous career promises. To avoid feeling pain in the future, she considers her husband dead the first time he deploys to space. Each time he returns, she experiences his presence like a memory. Despite his posture bent toward the ground, his attention is called toward the sky. He is incapable of inclining himself to his wife or son and consequently incapable of connection. They cannot mutually transform each other without connecting to their family through touch or attention. "The Rocket Man" highlights how vital proximity is to energy exchange. The husband and wife must share the air, but this alone is not enough. Life is lived with others.

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<sup>75</sup> Weber, *Enlivenment*, 19-50

<sup>76</sup> Bradbury, *The Illustrated Man*, 100

It is no surprise that our posture toward reading perpetuates this same feeling of death characterized by disconnection, distance, and isolation. When people decide they dislike reading, they do not know how to share life with the text. My research question fundamentally changed when I witnessed Weber tie death to isolation and correlate life with connection. I quickly realized I had been asking the wrong question. It became apparent that before reading can generate love, it has to perpetuate life. Instead of asking how I could help my students love reading, I wondered how reading could help increase their sense of aliveness. What Weber teaches us about what it means to feel alive has everything to do with how we make meaning with others. He is trained as a biologist but informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ecology. Weber spends a substantial amount of time erasing the nature/culture divide. The antidote for the ideology of death that plagues us is what Weber calls enlivenment. This is the shared dimension of aliveness that emerges between humans and nature—this sense of aliveness results when we transform each other through connection.

This self emerges through perceptions and through being touched, through sensual exchanges, through symbols and metaphors, and through the impact of molecules and light, all of which somehow transfer their relevance to the ongoing self-creation of the body. All life, from its very beginning, is made up of such mutual transformations.<sup>77</sup>

What Andreas Weber puts forth in *Enlivenment* is an alternative path to understanding some of the most fundamental concepts of our cultural economy. This was a great place

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<sup>77</sup> Weber, *Enlivenment*, 1.

to start. He does this on several fronts, and his approach offers a new way of being with and in the natural world. This natural world is not separate from culture but intimately intertwined with it. His path is one where matter, desire, and imagination are crucial to understanding our existence. I appreciate his approach because he brings biology and poetry into conversation with each other rather than regard these as separate areas of inquiry and expression.

Matter and memory, concepts you can think of as body and mind, are never as distinct as Rene Descartes might have wanted us to believe. Rethinking this separation and its potential applications is at the core of a great deal of philosophy. Process philosophy, in particular, or the ideas taught by Alfred North Whitehead, directly contends with the notion that mind and body are separate.<sup>78</sup> Instead, Whitehead's process philosophy celebrates an approach that weaves together various aspects of human experience. The nonprofit organization International Baccalaureate's Theory of Knowledge course is a current example. I was introduced to philosophy through this course when I was 15 years old. They present eight specific "ways of knowing" and "several areas of knowledge." These ways of knowing include language, sense perception, emotion, reason, imagination, faith, intuition, and memory. These areas of knowledge include mathematics, the natural sciences, the human sciences, arts, history, ethics, religious knowledge systems, and indigenous knowledge systems. This is the kind of approach Whitehead might appreciate. I appreciate that Weber follows thinkers like Whitehead to challenge the priority given to the mind while bodily experience is sidelined or dismissed.

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<sup>78</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 53.

As Weber articulates, Enlightenment-style thinking rejects the intertwining of matter and desire.<sup>79</sup> He is concerned that privileging rational thinking and dismissing all other ways of knowing is problematic. Our obsession with reason creates an eagerness to measure experience and contain knowledge, which is not necessarily bad unless this prohibits our newly acquired knowledge from ever moving. This leads to static thinking. The only problem with static thinking is that life is not fixed. We will probably never read the same way twice. Weber provokes his reader when he says, “rational thinking is an ideology that focuses on dead matter.”<sup>80</sup> It is easy to measure something that never moves. Once we measure it, we can identify it. The comfort and stability come from identifying matter and naming the processes we witness. As soon as we name or identify it, both of which are natural consequences of living in a post-enlightened world, we think we can control it. Weber is here to challenge our desire for control by showing us that cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual transformations offer an alternative economic path that leads to the feeling of being alive. I am here to indicate that control was never possible in the first place. This feeling is the antidote to the global burden of depression.

Reading is a metabolic process that transforms and revitalizes the body. When we read with our skin exposed, we grasp for life, meaning open pores eager to touch the richly woven texts before us. A posture inclined toward life is not only reaching for biological confirmation of pulsating, living cells, but for a symbolic, spiritual, and cultural affirmation that our experiences mean something. These experiences contribute to the feeling of interoception, which A.D. Craig refers to as “the feeling of being alive.

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<sup>79</sup> Weber, *Enlivenment*, 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid* 12.

In *The Extended Mind*, Annie Murphy Paul explores how our awareness of being alive is the basis for the “material me.”<sup>81</sup> Craig turns Descartes' famous maxim on its head to declare *I feel, therefore I am*.<sup>82</sup>

Annie Murphy Paul affirms this feeling of aliveness is the source of the most fundamental knowledge of ourselves. Breath reminds us of our autonomy and interdependence. She elaborates,

Because our hearts beat, because our lungs expand because our muscles stretch and our organs rumble — and because all these sensations, unique to us, have carried on without interruption since the day of our birth, we know what it is to be one continuous self, to be ourselves and no other.

That self is unique: wholly and thoroughly embodied. Indeed, the body keeps the score.<sup>83</sup> It is not only our past traumas written on our cells but “the steady flow of internal sensations we experience provides us with a sense of personal continuity.”<sup>84</sup> This sense of personal continuity is given to us through narrative.

Weber repeatedly refers to metabolism, which is a testament to his appreciation for one of the body's fundamental biological processes: change. When we consume food, our cells change it into energy. Our body is a threshold, continually transformed by what we put into it. Food is not all we consume, though. Every bodily experience, from hiking in the Himalayas to listening to the cello, participates in the same metabolic transformation.

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<sup>81</sup> Annie M. Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (Eamon Dolan Books, 2021), 43.

<sup>82</sup> Paul, *The Extended Mind*, 43.

<sup>83</sup> This phrase alludes to the title of Bessel van der Kolk's book, which explores the way memories of sensations are stored in our bodies.

<sup>84</sup> Paul, *The Extended Mind*, 43.

We bring each experience into our bodies, and conversion takes place. Our cells are continually renewed through activities like reading or running, laughing, or hugging. We participate in what David Abram calls the more than human world, and that same world is a participant in our existence. Weber declares the intent of his essay with boldness right upfront. “I will explore how we can begin to view all beings as participants in a common household,” he writes, “a common household of matter, desire, and imagination — an economy of metabolic and poetic transformations.”<sup>85</sup> If we want our approach to reading to lead us to life, we must weave together various voices and ideas that are as diverse as our environment. Life is perpetuated through interactivity. When a reader and a text interact, change is guaranteed. There is no guarantee that the reading will perpetuate joy or give life to the reader. A reading practice inclined toward life is possible for readers who increase their interaction with a text in pursuit of a connection. Reading for life is for meaning, which happens at the narrative level.

Reading requires a give and take or a call and response between the reader, her text, and the environment. By attending to and touching the text, the reader’s consciousness expands. What follows this dilation is communication that takes place in culture. The reader experiences a personal transformation before she influences a cultural shift. In her transformation, she weaves together memories evoked in the process. These memories are not only past impressions but also future connections, yet the creative act of reading takes place instantly - a breath.

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<sup>85</sup> Weber, *Enlivenment*, 1

## CHAPTER THREE

### INHALATION

We typically think of reading in relation to input or reception. Input is one part of the process, and this chapter demonstrates the receptive and creative functions of memory and imagination at work in the reading process. Receptive and creative functions of memory and imagination work together in the reading process. Beginning with inhalation or receiving input, I advocate for an inclination toward the phenomena we read. I use the term inclination to describe the posture of the reader willing to participate in receiving and creating the text. She is open to the life-giving, wonder-inducing experiences of reading. It is not only an inclination to the text that I am after but an inclination to a life of varied backgrounds and rich connections. This posture is hospitable in the sense that it welcomes all walks of life from a variety of backgrounds and would inspire more diverse interpretations. This chapter establishes the need to turn matter into memory. Remembering is the ability to integrate meaning into our lives by composing a narrative and is critical for creative expression. This is part of what it takes to read in a meaningful way.

#### **Remembering Neverland**

I learned to read *Little Bear* when I was four. Elsa Holmelund told the story, and Marice Sendak illustrated the first pages that came to life for me and set me on the path of becoming a reader. I remember being next to my mom in her bed when I sounded out the words for the first time. She was excited for me. I could tell by the high-pitched soft

vibrations of her voice. When I read those words, my consciousness expanded. The children's author, Mem Fox, calls this expansion "reading magic."<sup>86</sup> The magic exists between a child's cognitive life, the book in their hands, and the community they symbolically enter when they sound out those first words. Now that I am a mother, I understand the joy of witnessing this phenomenon in a fledgling reader. One day you see lines - the next day, you see worlds.

These moments of a child's life typically happen between the ages of four and eight. The best part is that every time I read, I enter into a relationship with my book that offers this kind of expansion, as long as I remember what I encounter on those pages. We typically think of those few moments of reading magic as fleeting, increasing our fondness for them. It isn't easy to return to the best parts of our childhood. While few of us relive the memories of that childhood magic, parents and caregivers witness the cycle repeat in their child's life. I have experienced this joy twice with two of my three children. When my sons read their first words, their faces lit up, and so did mine. When I realized how rare it is to witness this magic, I liked to play with the idea of capturing it the way people talk about catching lightning in a bottle. I would do anything to bottle that magic so we could share that experience again and again.

I imagine my desire to capture these experiences' emotions is similar to what motivated James Barrie to write the story of Peter Pan, Wendy, and the lost boys.<sup>87</sup> Peter Pan teaches one of the greatest lessons of all time: "All the world is made of faith, trust,

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<sup>86</sup> Mem Fox and Judy Horacek, *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (Harper Design, 2015).

and pixie dust.”<sup>88</sup> If the magic of childhood exists *somewhere*, then maybe Barrie could contain it. After all, Neverland is an island. You have to think happy thoughts and sprinkle fairy dust to reach it. Reaching it is the easy part, though; remembering it is the challenge.

What is interesting to consider is how the location of Neverland is not only spatial but also temporal. Temporally, the story of *Peter Pan* captures the tension that arises in adolescence between the adventures of youth and the resistance to the responsibilities of adulthood. Peter Pan trades parents and pending adulthood for endless adventures with fairies and pirates. Neverland exists in the precious moments between wake and sleep, and the journey expands time. Time, though, is challenging to reference when it comes to Neverland. The children only left the nursery for a few hours, but their Neverland adventures seemed to last seven months. Even still, Neverland itself is timeless. The crocodile famously swallows the ticking clock, the symbol of mechanical time. It is the inability to perceive time that simultaneously haunts and seduces readers. After all, the island is the home of the one child who never grows up. That is part of its appeal. Neverland promises escape to anyone willing to leave their superego behind. Spatially, readers navigate past "the second star to the right and straight on 'til morning." These directions playfully suggest you locate Neverland in space *and* time, and you can find it just beyond the horizon.

This might surprise you, but I have a significant problem with how we read Neverland. My problem with Neverland is not with the story itself. It has to do with how

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<sup>88</sup> Barrie, *Peter Pan*.

our posture toward reading, and living, has caused us to pervert the tale into something it's not. The island has become a fetishized image that motivates readers to desire empty adventure instead of a meaningful life. The way we read something as simple as *Peter Pan* changes how we live. My problem with Neverland is not that prolonged adolescence inspires emotional immaturity, although this interpretation might surface in psychoanalytic literary criticism. My problem with Neverland is not that children oriented toward play delay the capitalist machine and the onset of grown-up responsibilities, although Marxist literary criticism might support that conclusion. So what exactly is wrong with Neverland? This is the source of my problem: Neverland is perceived as a kind of escape from the mundane circumstances of our lives, but the promise of that escape comes at a cost that strips us of our individuality. To stay in Neverland, you must forfeit your memory. After a few days of adventures on the island, John and Michael have trouble recalling the names of their parents. Peter Pan, too, forgets both names and past experiences. The longer the children remain there, the more profoundly they forget their previous lives. Meanwhile, readers fantasize about adventure without recognizing the cost of forgetting. Neil Postman explores the cost of forgetting in similar circumstances in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Neverland operates with the same logic of forgetting we witness when national powers inhibit artists and writers from social expression. This theme emerges in political fiction like *1984*, where “forgetting” is forced upon citizens by the Ministry of Truth to exercise censorship and control. Just like Neverland represents a physical space of escape and forgetting, Orwell imagines forgetting in terms of space. Memory holes were placed

in every room for party members to incinerate documents, photographs, or any other information.

If information is synonymous with knowledge, and knowledge is power, then the Party exercised this power by forcing citizens of Oceania to forget anything that might contradict their love of Big Brother. Nevertheless, Big Brother manufactures cultural memories and changes history to maintain order and control. The irony here is that love without memory is impossible. This is why Peter Pan cannot return Wendy's love: he has no memory. It is not just his refusal to grow up that he refuses to love. Without memory, it is not an option.

We see the theme of political domination and forgetting emerge in the Czech writer Milan Kundera's 1979 novel, *The History of Laughter and Forgetting*. The tension between love and memory emerges when Mirek sets out to destroy the love letters he wrote to Zdena, which functionally allows him to erase his love for her. "The struggle of man against power," Kundera writes, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting."<sup>89</sup> In a similar fashion to 1984, the themes of memory, love, and control intersect political and personal aspects of the characters' lives. Kundera refers to the "organized forgetting" that concerns the Soviet Union's attempts to erase the Czechoslovakian consciousness.<sup>90</sup> Like Orwell, Kundera's novel critiques the deliberate censoring and altering of historical events. Both novels feature a photograph that is altered or destroyed, effectively rewriting history and changing the course of the future. What is peculiar about Orwell's and

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<sup>89</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 4.

<sup>90</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Milan Kundera: A Man Who Cannot Forget," *The New York Times - Breaking News, US News, World News and Videos*, last modified January 18, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/18/arts/milan-kundera-a-man-who-cannot-forget.html>.

Kundera's novels is how the control of individual and collective memory is directly tied to informational documents like photographs and letters. Once the physical presence of these photographs is erased, the unique characters cannot resist forgetting, even though the novel's tension relies on the hope that they might remember.

The tension between memory and forgetting creates the space for readers and writers to create meaning in the form of narrative. Toni Morrison elaborates on this impulse in her essay, "Culture Specific and Race Free." To achieve this creative impulse in her novel *Beloved*, she focuses on memory instead of recorded history. "But writing," Morrison explains, "is not simply recollecting or reminiscing or even epiphany." For Morrison, writing is a doing - an act of creation. The writer creates narratives and gives new life to the world she writes about. She calls her work "rememory" which includes recollecting, remembering, and "reassembling the members of the body, the family, and the population of the past."<sup>91</sup> She deliberately avoids writing to react against the dominant stories of the time. Morrison's real power as a writer is her ability to approach her characters as subjects of a historical moment instead of objects. She can do this with affection and care, even while the final pages reinforce the fragility of memory in a culture historically forbidden to write their tale.

To return to Peter Pan's story, readers recognize Neverland offers characters a choice to pursue individual desires and resist outside control. The conflict arises between a child's inclination for play and society's expectations. Power, in this case, is synonymous with the parental figures, Mr. and Mrs. Darling, and their household rules. There is a neat

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<sup>91</sup> Toni Morrison, "I Wanted to Carve out a World Both Culture-Specific and Race-free," *The Guardian*, last modified August 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/toni-morrison-rememory-essay>.

parallel between the symbol of authority represented by the children's parents in London and the threat of Captain Hook in Neverland. Interestingly, the actor who plays the father in the play often doubles as Captain Hook. There are also societal pressures at work in London in the novel that we cannot ignore. Mr. Darling's job at the bank, his desire to please his employer, and his obsession with polite society akin to "what will the neighbors think" are all evidence of the invisible pressures contributing to the conflict in the story. When children escape to Neverland, they are escaping these shackles of society. The parallels between Peter Pan and the political novels that Orwell and Kundera wrote are strong, even if the children choose to forget instead of it being forced upon them. Despite the similar themes, we rarely read *Peter Pan* as political. If we embrace Hannah Arendt's definition of politics as "the art of living together," then it is clear that the themes in these stories are more than entertaining.<sup>92</sup> There is a seldom appreciated recognition that we must remember when it comes to the fantasy of Neverland, and it directly relates to reading. Finding Neverland does not mean we choose imagination, adventure, and play. The real reward is in resisting Neverland by returning home. In resisting Neverland, we choose to remember.

When Joseph Campbell articulated the hero's journey, he did not treat the journey itself as the destination, but this is how we treat Neverland. Interestingly enough, this is how we treat reading as well. The hero has to return home a different person. When we read for information so that we might score well on a test or read for entertainment as a means to escape our mundane circumstances, we are choosing Neverland. In choosing

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<sup>92</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 169.

Neverland, or these other short-lived ideas, we forfeit any potential transformation that the interactivity of reading might offer. The appeal is not in the escape or the interactivity of reading itself. We must pursue Neverland, or open the book, but return home with the wisdom and knowledge of the experience. This is why memory is crucial to human flourishing.

Memory, the ability to integrate meaning into our lives by composing a narrative, is what it takes to read in a meaningful way. Memory is critical for creative expression, and readers suspect Wendy intuitively that. After all, she is the one who decides to leave Neverland and return home. She and her brothers return to London and face the promise of growing up. She chooses to remember, and she chooses a meaningful life with that choice. Neverland expands her horizons, and returning to London allows her to integrate her adventures into her life. Without this ability to integrate her experiences by creating a narrative, she is destined to live a life like Peter Pan. His life is full of adventure but devoid of meaning, precisely because he cannot remember. After she grows up, Wendy tells the story of her experiences to her daughter, who also takes flight with Peter Pan and repeats the cycle. Notably, there is repetition but with a difference. The story symbolically ends by returning to the beginning in a gesture that bends time.<sup>93</sup> Frank Kermode teaches that you can always find the ending of a story in the beginning, which means you can find the beginning in the end.

Like Wendy's Neverland adventures, learning to read opens up new horizons. When we remember our experiences, they are part of who we are: deeply felt and intricately

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<sup>93</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2000).

woven into our fabric of existence. Each strand of knowledge is a memory connecting our present moment to past experiences and future expectations. When our postures are open and inclined toward what we read, each reading experience offers opportunities for expansion and the potential to make space for transformation. Reading increases the feeling of being alive by making connections, considering our relationship to those connections, and integrating the knowledge and experience into our lives in the form of memories. Put simply, we read to make meaning, and this meaning contributes to our formation. It helps us to become who we are. With every new reading experience, our consciousness expands. Reading is a creative act, and reading magic is not confined to childhood. The meaning we make and then integrate into our lives takes us from reading magic to reading for the formation and eventually for transformation.

A text embodies the timeless, choral space of Neverland, but it also expands time, and the reader charts its territory like a way-finder. We orient ourselves in space and time to the text determines whether we read for life instead of death, remembrance instead of forgetting. This posture of inclined reading means we embark on the adventure ourselves and create meaning in tandem with the text. The printed word is more than a container of information. Instead of extracting data from what we read, we read to make meaning. The text is a complex organism, vibrant matter, an entire life-world, and a galaxy all at once. As the reader inclines herself to the text, reading helps her understand the material world, the spirit of the times, and herself. The only way to read this way is by weaving our narrative into the interpretation. The reader is always implicated in the act of reading, and I suspect it is this sense of agency and infinite potential a child feels when she first learns

to read. We must dangle our toes over the edge of the window and leap toward Neverland. When we relate what we read to our own lives in a more purposeful and integrative way, our reading experiences and life experiences will offer mutual transformation and the felt sense of aliveness that leads to overcoming suffering and finding long-lasting joy. This reading posture is an ecological approach that leads to mutual transformation between the reader and text. Reading expands consciousness, and parents, teachers, and caregivers witness this most profoundly when a child first learns to read. This expansion requires interactivity between the reader and her text, but this alone is not enough, and this is what we learn in resisting Neverland. We understand what totalitarian governments knew all along: memory and imagination are crucial to human flourishing.

### **Material Imagination**

Reading is often associated with our cognitive faculties with little to no regard for how our bodies experience sensation in response to reading. Part of the reason for this oversight is that the image-making function of the imagination is tied to the sense of sight. In the previous chapter, I demonstrate how the correlation between eyesight and intellect stems from our Western oral culture, and the rigidity of that relationship plagued the future of epistemology. We limit our capacity to relate to phenomena when we downplay the body's role in meaning-making and the interactivity that takes place with phenomena.

Rather than reject the imagination altogether, the following section considers the implications of a material imagination articulated by Gaston Bachelard. Bachelard was a

French thinker who wrote and thought about philosophy and science. He successfully brought these seemingly disparate modes of inquiry into conversation together. His academic background was in physics, and he eagerly explored every hidden crevice in the natural world, including elements like earth, air, water, and fire. As a thinker always at the edge of thought, Bachelard is just as fascinated by noumena as he is phenomena.

His explorations eventually led him to fuse what he calls the "material imagination," which he accessed by concentrating on the physical world's elemental aspects. These elements functioned like a creative heuristic for his writing. He relates these elements to their poetic image by tracing connections between literary history and his observations. His imagination serves as a threshold, and he carries their rich histories of aesthetic force into the present moment. The past is constantly and creatively renewed by what Bachelard calls the intuition of the instant.<sup>94</sup>

This renewal is a moment-by-moment recognition of the what and the why coming together. Bachelard explains it is one "when we suddenly understand our own message."<sup>95</sup> The greatest strength of the imagination for Bachelard is its transformative power that operates in each moment. The imagination is constantly in dialogue with the senses and leads us to this flash of insight. Reading excites the body in tangible ways and starts with the material imagination - the part of us that creates the images that make up the narratives as we respond to a text. In the following section, I argue the vivacity of the imagination in dialogue with the senses inspires habitual change.

The imagination is many ideas. It behaves poetically, materially, elementally,

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<sup>94</sup> Gaston Bachelard, Jean Lescure, and Eileen Rizo-Patron, *Intuition of the Instant* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>95</sup> Bachelard, *Intuition of the Instant*, 3.

existentially, and creatively. The imagination informs how we experience the world; it informs perception. Bachelard is consistent throughout his writing career on the radical role imagination plays for readers. In *Water and Dreams*, a poetic reverie inviting the reader to wander among the bank of a river in one breath and feel the immense power of an ocean wave crashing in the next, he challenges what we think we know about imagination: "The imagination is not, as its etymology suggests, the faculty for forming images of reality; it is the faculty for forming images which go beyond reality, which sing reality."<sup>96</sup> He then calls the imagination "a superhuman faculty."<sup>97</sup>

The turn toward music is Bachelard's notion that the imagination is not only sensational but also radically instantaneous. He complicates the idea of duration and practically calls it an illusion. The only way we know the instant is through habit.<sup>98</sup> What takes place at the moment resonates from the preceding moment. The best way to understand this is through the idea of rhythm.

In a book of fragments published four years after he died, he articulates the nuance between two philosophical concepts: the ideas and the image:

The invention of an idea and the imagination of an image are very different psychological exploits. Ideas are invented only as correctives to the past. Through repeated rectifications of this kind, one may hope to disengage an idea that is valid. There is no original truth, only original error. Scientific ideas have a long history of error. The poetic imagination, for its part, has no history at all. It admits

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<sup>96</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (1983), 16.

<sup>97</sup> Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 16.

<sup>98</sup> Bachelard, *Intuition of the Instant*, 30.

to no past preparation. The poetic image is truly the work of a spoken instant.<sup>99</sup>

Apprehending the lived experience is akin to listening to a sonata. Bachelard also anticipates Richard Kearney's mention of music as the root of carnal memory.<sup>100</sup>

Imagination and memory function similarly in that the way we apprehend them both is through narrative continuity.

In response to Gaston Bachelard's meditation on water and dreams, Mircea Eliade explores how the psychic realities evoked through recognizing symbols turn around and invest meanings into our everyday experience. The following excerpt is gleaned directly from Eliade's journals after he had finished reading Bachelard's *Water and Dreams*:

Bachelard believes that a symbol has a psychological history. This may be true, but what interests me is that once constituted, the symbol is invested with a double function: "existential" and "cognitive." On the one hand, a symbol unifies various sectors of reality (aquatic symbolism, for example, reveals the structural solidarity among Water, Moon, becoming, vegetation, femininity, germs, birth, death, rebirth, etc.) On the other hand, the symbol is always open, in the sense that it is capable of revealing "transcendent" meanings which are not "given" (not evident) in immediate experience. For example, the rites of baptism reveal a plane of the real other than the biocosmic (birth-death-rebirth): they reveal the "spiritual birth," rebirth to a transcendent mode of being ("salvation," etc.).<sup>101</sup>

This passage qualifies Bachelard's thoughts on the nature of the instant, demonstrating that each beat carries a rich history of the preceding moments. These

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<sup>99</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire* (Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture, 1990), 7.

<sup>100</sup> Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (No Limits, 2021), 29.

<sup>101</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Journal I, 1945-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3.

moments influence both cognition and existence. The recognition of symbolic meanings necessarily relies on memory. Reading, then, is a matter of the imagination corresponding with memory to evoke resonance. That symbolic resonance comes by way of repetition experienced through proximity. Bachelard's notion of time and memory is future-focused. This quality is somewhat unique to Bachelard, although it hints at Augustine's conception of time, which Henri Bergson inherits. Bergson, like Bachelard, relates it to the perceptive act in *Matter and Memory*: "However instantaneous, your perception consists then in an incalculable multitude of remembered elements; in truth, every perception is already memory. Practically we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future."<sup>102</sup> Bergson and Bachelard are on the same page, although Bachelard emphasizes the creative and aesthetic force of the imagination alongside the essential faculty of memory. The imagination and memory feed the reader images that relate to our lives.<sup>103</sup> Kearney affirms this and describes how imagination alters reality in Bachelard's text: "For him, imagination was at once receptive and creative - an acoustic of listening and an art of participation. The two functions, passive and active, were inseparable. The world itself dreams, he said, and we help give it voice."<sup>104</sup>

Not only do phenomena function symbolically right in front of us, but each experience of that phenomenon adds material to our closely woven fabric of reality. The imagination is multifaceted and enacts cognitive and existential functions Eliade so eloquently

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<sup>102</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (North Chelmsford: Courier Corporation, 2012), 194.

<sup>103</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 105.

<sup>104</sup> Richard Kearney, "Introduction," *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (London: Penguin, 2014), xx.

identifies. No matter how eloquently we describe the role of the imagination, we must remember how complex the process of living and therefore imagining is. With each breath, we apprehend new and living phenomena while attempting to navigate time and space and charting the territory that we traverse.

In his book, *Biopoetics: Towards an Existential Ecology*, German biologist Andreas Weber calls poetic space the most simple and enigmatic of all possible spaces. Eliade, he acknowledges, helps solidify the essence of poetic space. Poetic space does not re-present anything but offers a way to describe space that is alive:

Many symbols of nature in this perspective are not metaphors, but crystallized insights into forms of deep connection, ideas which do not refer to a platonic beyond but to an embodied here and now. The philosopher and writer Mircea Eliade observed that the physical sky through its concrete relation to ourselves, reveals the ideas of transcendence, power, and eternity. These ideas exist in an absolute manner in the material sky, as it is high, vast, and home to forces that we cannot control. Therefore it is the poetic space of that which is unreachable, endless, and powerful. The blue of the sky is primordial, as it connects our experience directly to its meaning. It does not show anything, but it is.<sup>105</sup>

For Eliade, no objects are inherently autonomous and carry value in and of themselves. This powerful, primordial essence that emerges from poetic space is a consequence of our status as dynamic, moving beings in relation to each other and the phenomena before us. He doubles down on this idea in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*:

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<sup>105</sup> Andreas Weber, *Biopoetics: Towards an Existential Ecology* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2016), 132.

If we observe the general behavior of archaic man, we are struck by the following fact: neither the objects of the external world nor human acts, properly speaking, have any autonomous intrinsic value. Objects or acts acquire a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them. Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred -- and hence instantly becomes saturated with being -- because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act, and so on.<sup>106</sup>

Recognition of sacred phenomena requires a relationship. Not just a relationship between each experience, a concept we have come to know as narrative, but also a connection between human phenomena. The unique history of each experience flavors this relationship in our present-day understanding. According to Eliade, a kind of original symbolic act informs the meaning of each repeated exposure to phenomena.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram writes about the role that repetition plays in the relationship between these rich connections that make up the fabric of our universe: “Human events take on meaning only to the extent that they can be located within a storied universe that continually retells itself; unprecedented events, singular encounters that have no place among the cycling stories, can have no place, either, among the turning seasons or the cycles of earth and sky.”<sup>107</sup> Meaning is tied to the story, the story is tied to a narrative, and repetition is how the narrative reinforces the poetics of space. Repetition is required for space to sing reality,

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<sup>106</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1959), 3-4.

<sup>107</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 187.

but remember, reading is not about digestion as much as it inspires dancing.<sup>108</sup> That means it requires our participation. This is fitting as David Abram confirms that for Mircea Eliade, repetition is not solely a descriptive act but also a creative act.<sup>109</sup> Creation implies participation. This is what Eliade had in mind when he says, “Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is “meaningless,” i.e., it lacks reality.”<sup>110</sup> Participation fosters connection and breeds familiarity. Resonance is meaningful and life-giving so long as we never approach the material that makes up reality with a cold or distant disposition.

This familiarity underlies Gaston Bachelard’s exploration of the house in *The Poetics of Space*. He offers readers a direct ontology accessible by dwelling in the world and explains that before he is cast into the world, man is laid in the cradle of the house.<sup>111</sup> Though not by name, this section seems like a pointed response to Martin Heidegger’s famous dictum, “Language is a house of being. In its home, man dwells.”<sup>112</sup> Bachelard explains that “being is already a value.”<sup>113</sup> It is likely that for Bachelard, Heidegger’s notion of language carries a little too much distance to offer life warmth akin to the bosom of the house.<sup>114</sup> Bachelard might have overlooked that Heidegger’s notion of dwelling includes preservation, care, and protection. The point is that Bachelard retains a high view of language and aims to experience it from the inside out - after all, the

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<sup>108</sup> Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), xii.

<sup>109</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 186.

<sup>110</sup> Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 34.

<sup>111</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 29.

<sup>112</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 257-258.

<sup>113</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 29.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid* 29.

imagination is material. Rather than view language as a tool that is external to us, Bachelard calls language reality.<sup>115</sup> This is why the poetic image carries so much weight for Bachelard: it does not bring language closer to the reader - the image is language.

Time is language as well. Edward Casey teases out the same extremely delicate nuance regarding the dynamic nature of time, precisely the instant. After all, we apprehend time like we apprehend the image. This is how memories present themselves in material form. Edward Casey elaborates on this in the chapter titled “The Difference an Instant Makes,” in which he proposes that a Bachelardian posture toward time might prompt us to trade the noun “instant” for the adverb “instantaneously” to discipline our thinking about time.<sup>116</sup> Time, like truth, and the language we use to articulate these ideas, is in the process of becoming. Rather than say the instant brings the new, we realize “the instant is the new: it is the new now, the now as news, the new itself insofar as we can know it, or at least as we can sense it: this, all of this.”<sup>117</sup> This orientation offers a dynamism inherent in the instant that is present in a word, just like it is present in the image. Remember, for Bachelard, imagination is material. Apprehending the continuity of time requires the reader to attend to the material in consideration. For Bachelard, material imagination is when the subject is transported into things.<sup>118</sup>

## **Carnal Echoes**

To trace our experiences over time, the reader synthesizes these ever-changing

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid 11.

<sup>116</sup> Edward Casey, “The Difference an Instant Makes,” *Adventures in Phenomenology: Gaston Bachelard*, eds. Eileen Rizo-Patron, Edward S. Casey, and Jason M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 27.

<sup>117</sup> Casey, “The Difference an Instant Makes,” 27.

<sup>118</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on Images of Interiority* (2011), 2.

experiences by giving them narrative cohesion and relating to them by integrating them into daily life. Wolfgang Iser posits the wandering viewpoint, an idea that emphasizes how the reader moves about the text for a series of concurrent experiences to describe the dynamism of the reading process. In *The Act of Reading*, he explains how every reading moment sends out stimuli into the memory while each recollection activates and modifies perspectives that lead to an idea of reading that defies typical spatiotemporal descriptions. For Iser, “reading does not merely flow forward, but recalled segments have a retroactive effect with the present transforming the past.”<sup>119</sup> Readers can wander between images evoked while reading because “every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space.”<sup>120</sup> We must remember that these images are not tied to sight but experience.

In *Dreaming by the Book*, Elaine Scarry upholds the vivacity of imagination and our perceptual capacity for reading.<sup>121</sup> She maintains that a narrative works despite the lack of sensation experienced while reading words on a page, claiming this is especially noticeable compared to senses evoked while apprehending other art forms. Scarry mentions that the Russian aesthete N. G. Chernishevsky made a similar point in his book *Life and Aesthetics*, “All other arts, like live reality, act directly on our senses; poetry acts on the imagination.”<sup>122</sup> This is problematic, but it does not surprise me. Scarry explains that Chernishevsky regards the image-making function of the imagination activated when reading as impoverished compared to how it creates images when it

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<sup>119</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1980), 115.

<sup>120</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 396.

<sup>121</sup> Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>122</sup> Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 249.

apprehends experiences in real life.<sup>123</sup> She maintains that experiences with a text directly influence the imagination, but their bodily resonance is downplayed.

In the book, *In Bed With the Word*, Daniel Coleman explores the spiritual dimensions of reading. He follows Scarry to celebrate a spiritual reading experience as though it were set apart from the body's response to real-life happenings, even when those experiences are aesthetic. He writes,

As Elaine Scarry has pointed out, printed text is unique among the various arts because, unlike painting, photography, music, sculpture, or architecture — let alone multimedia — it contains almost no sensuous content. Painting uses actual colors, textures, and shapes to convey its concepts and impressions to the viewer's mind; music produces sounds you can actually hear; and architecture uses walls you can physically touch and floors you can walk on. By contrast, the written text provides extremely meager sensuous material: a series of black marks on a page or symbols on a computer screen physically unrelated to the mental images these marks seek to convey.<sup>124</sup>

Although I agree with Scarry's overwhelming reverence for the faculty of the imagination, especially in the act of reading, she overlooks the materiality of language and how this materiality influences the body's role in perception. Apprehending written language implicates the body and our felt experience because of this materiality, not despite it. The imagination directly influences our emotional response, and emotions are bodily experiences. The mind is not separate from the body but intertwined with it. We

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Daniel Coleman, *In Bed with the Word: Reading, Spirituality, and Cultural Politics* (University of Alberta, 2009), 28.

perceive our experience mentally and physically with beautiful differences, but to separate these faculties limits our experiences with them. Dual-aspect monism is a potential help here and can account for our everyday experience “of being an interior subject perceiving an exterior reality.”<sup>125</sup> This idea permits a necessary nuance to our bodily experience, although it does not offer the richness that perceiving twoness provides to the reader.<sup>126</sup>

Scarry never intended to downplay the body’s role in meaning-making. Her argument focuses on the rich experience of the imagination that produces a “mimesis of sensation by miming the deep structure that brings the sensation about.”<sup>127</sup> The imagination does this by conjuring up a scene described in a story with exactitude. The precision we read stems from our previous experiences, including both real-life experiences and symbolic resonance. The joy or suffering that dilates within us while reading comes from connecting to details and relating them to our lives. These relationships are an act of making meaning in response to a text.

While we think of meaning-making in terms of verbal structures, we must include images evoked in our memories when we read. Architect Alberto Perez Gomez acknowledges this when he affirms, “The poetic image is not a copy; it augments reality. It is not a picture that we can paraphrase, yet it is given to us through the privileged senses of sight and hearing.”<sup>128</sup> There is an exquisite precision with which we read and

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<sup>125</sup> Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2019), 120.

<sup>126</sup> Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (London: Routledge, 2017), 42.

<sup>127</sup> Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 250.

<sup>128</sup> Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 108.

experience the world. Still, we apprehend those experiences with a synaesthetic perception that complicates our ability to distinguish one sensation from another. It seems the articulation of our feelings is more precise than our experience of them.

There is an elemental, raw, and even a regenerative power of the flesh awaiting exploration enriched by reading. It is this kind of renaissance that reading offers. How do we create an image of thought when we read that is so real we can touch it and enter into a relationship that provides mutual transformation? The first step is to embrace the dynamism inherent in the reading process by moving beyond sight. Rather than displacing sight altogether and reaffirming reading's relationship to cognition, I welcome Maurice Merleau-Ponty's tactile perception. In "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty comments on how interior and exterior experiences are co-constituted in the perceptive act. We qualify each experience based on its relation to other acute experiences, weaving new observations into our constantly renewing fabric of reality: "Quality, light, color, depth, which are over there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them."<sup>129</sup> These carnal echoes Andreas Weber describes the interpretive process that follows each confrontation with matter:

Our body translates our constant material contact with the rest of the world into meaning. Matter that seeks to maintain itself in some particular, improbable, animate form - as do amoebas and hummingbirds, blue whales and tardigrades -- interprets the world of stuff and of energy transfers into a world of meanings and subjective experiences. Matter that seeks to preserve its own existence, as

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<sup>129</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 355.

metabolizing bodies do, thereby transforms the exterior world into an interior world, constantly creating meaning out of touch.<sup>130</sup>

Reading is the practice of attuning synaesthetic perception to expand the felt quality of lived experience. Perception in this context is the delicate balancing act between reception and creation. To read well, we must enhance our understanding of sensory perceptions while at the same time appreciating the symbolic resonance on each page. We do not pursue feelings for feelings' sake, but remember, we enter into a relationship with the text that requires our response to be one of responsibility.<sup>131</sup>

Enhancing these sensational responses through attending to the symbolic capacity of a text reminds us that we inhabit a poetic space shared with other interdependent beings. In the same way, the painter harmonizes disparate materials for the spectator to enjoy, and the author hopes to bring the reader into a fuller awareness of their own becoming with the book. Unless you are a synesthete, you experience color, taste, sound, smell, and touch as separate entities.<sup>132</sup> Merleau-Ponty recognizes the synesthete's ability to experience a more blended version of reality rather than isolated sensations. This multisensory awareness is the kind of perception we aspire to as readers:

These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. It is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses. The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the data of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us

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<sup>130</sup> Andreas Weber, *Matter and Desire: An Erotic Ecology* (Hartford: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017), 86.

<sup>131</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 110.

<sup>132</sup> Julia Simner, *Synaesthesia* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2019), 3.

from the start as the center from which the data radiate. We see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cezanne even claimed we see their odor.<sup>133</sup>

Cezanne's aim to "make visible how the world touches us" positions him as a critical figure for synthesizing sensory experience and manifesting it in artistic expression.<sup>134</sup> "A painter like Cezanne, an artist, or a philosopher, must not only create and express an idea," according to Merleau-Ponty, "but must also awaken the experiences which will make the idea take root in the consciousness of others"<sup>135</sup> Merleau-Ponty's meditation on Cezanne's talent reminds readers that we share responsibility with the author to help living ideas take root in the soil of our minds.

Instead of apprehending the image of thought as though it exclusively presents itself to our sight, we experience it in the body. This echoes Paul Ricoeur's point in *Hermeneutics* when he points out that for Aristotle, *mimesis* was not a copy of reality but *poiesis* itself.<sup>136</sup> In *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Mikel Dufrenne affirms, "to read is to perceive."<sup>137</sup> In the context of this statement, he describes how words possess a unique weight, physicality, and gravity. Reading is perceiving, but the perceptive act requires making. We make more than meaning. This process starts with the body. The brain's reading ability depends on tactile reading practices and symbolic recognition. Cognitive neuroscientist Stanislaus Dehaene prioritizes tactility in his book

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<sup>133</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15.

<sup>134</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 19.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid 19.

<sup>136</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 62.

<sup>137</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 210.

*Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read*.<sup>138</sup> When children are taught to trace the contours of a large paper cutout of letters, the method “brings together gestures, touch, vision, and a sense of space.”<sup>139</sup> A sobering sentiment to Dehaene’s research reminds readers that the brain’s structure always limits invention and cultural construction. We are always a product of our space in time. Reading is perception and requires participation. This is the first step in reading toward life.

Dehaene explores the neural basis of reading in his 2009 book, *Reading and the Brain*: Neuroscience exploded two decades before this publication. Dehaene carefully demonstrates the wide-ranging implications for the reading brain. He is responsible for the neuronal recycling hypothesis, an aspect of neuroplasticity, which is the ability to recycle brain circuitry for word recognition. There are several moments in Dehaene’s book that associates reading with what is artificial to emphasize how the cognitive process of reading is not part of the brain’s original design but is a product of cultural evolution. This means that reading for Dehaene is not a natural outgrowth of existence but a tool that has developed alongside other technologies to increase survival. His conviction requires a view of reading that privileges sight, yet even Dehaene’s research explicitly challenges this by showing how recognition is felt in the body.

Instead of confining our idea of reading to word recognition, what if we expand the neuronal recycling hypothesis to sense recognition? What would it take to apprehend the materiality of language and imagination and bring reading inside the body? How do we capture the textures of a text? The reader is made of mind and matter, and our reading

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<sup>138</sup> Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (London: Penguin, 2010), 299.

<sup>139</sup> Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain*, 299.

habits must reflect that. Instead of taking a purely cognitive approach to reading, as though reading to evoke an image of thought is only a function of cognition and is solely responsible for how a reader responds to a text, I follow a long line of thinkers writing in the area of carnal hermeneutics to consider the role of the body in the reading process.

We attend to the word or image instantly, which is a meditative act.<sup>140</sup> Reading is an act of perception that simultaneously combines reception and creation. As a unique container of language, the poem welcomes this dynamic and creative interpretation. However, Bachelard suggests that this kind of creative reading happens at the level of the word.<sup>141</sup> When our senses conspire with energy in language, we expand the very material we read. These words, after all, are the keys to the universe: “to the dual universe of the Cosmos and the depths of the human spirit.”<sup>142</sup> For Bachelard, expanding this dual universe with our dynamic, elemental, material, and utterly creative imagination is at work in space and time: “Imagination is a laboratory of the possible inviting us--through reverie and poetry-- to give a future to the past. And it is not just a matter of a private past but of a shared reservoir of resonances bequeathed to us by the great poets from Homer and Ovid to Rilke and Valery.”<sup>143</sup>

Despite Bachelard appreciating the dynamism of the reader and exploring the nuances of the material imagination, he regards the text’s material as passive. Reading is a tool of the imagination that allows the reader to enter into a relationship with the book.

Bachelard describes reading as a dimension of consciousness, yet he regards the book as

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<sup>140</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (London: Penguin, 2014), 215.

<sup>141</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 189.

<sup>142</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 215.

<sup>143</sup> Richard Kearney, “Introduction,” Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xx-xxi.

a static, unchanging entity. He even calls the book permanent to emphasize its materiality.<sup>144</sup> He animates the reader's felt experience in response to the book as an object. I disagree with Bachelard's view that the book is not vibrant. The reading process has nothing static about either side of the equation. Words carry distant pasts, "swollen with insanities."<sup>145</sup> It is up to the reader, or what Merleau-Ponty calls a seer, to apprehend this moving communication. When we read words on a page, we are "cooperative participants in a dynamic process of perceptual unfolding."<sup>146</sup> Merleau-Ponty describes the dynamism at play in this perceptual unfolding:

Already our existence as seers (that is, we said, as beings who turn the world back upon itself and who pass over to the other side, and who catch sight of one another, who see one another with eyes) and especially our existence as sonorous beings for others and for ourselves contain everything required for there to be speech from the one to the other, speech about the world. And, in a sense, to understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being, or, as we put it so well, to *hear what it says (l'entendre)*. The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of "psychic reality" spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, 24.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid 17.

<sup>146</sup> Rachel McCann, "Perceptual Unfolding in the Palace of Minos," Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell, *Chora, Volume Six: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2011), 114.

<sup>147</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 155.

Oh, how I yearn to have ears to hear the polyvocal vibrations contained in each word I encounter. How does the book move? The answer is in the vibrations. We hear “the interior sonorities” in words in reading and writing.<sup>148</sup> Readers witness the rich histories and vibrating resonances that words carry through space and time. Owen Barfield considered words “fossils of consciousness.”<sup>149</sup> Fossils are portals into the past and records of voices, thought, and the environment that came before.<sup>150</sup> What is unique about the creative impulse of reading is that we both invent and discover the voices hidden in each word that create meanings. In *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, Bachelard offers a phenomenological practice he calls the poetics of reverie. Bachelard explains that “reverie” is mistakenly regarded as passive when it is a creative activity.

Faced with images which the poets bring us, faced with images which we could never have imagined ourselves, this naïveté of wonderment is completely natural. But in submitting passively to such wonder, one does not participate profoundly enough in the creating imagination. The phenomenology of the image requires that we participate actively in the creating imagination. Since the goal of all phenomenology is to situate awareness in the present, in a moment of extreme tension, we are forced to conclude that, in so far as the characteristics of the imagination are concerned, there is no phenomenology of passivity.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, 51.

<sup>149</sup> Mark Vernon, *A Secret History of Christianity: Jesus, the Last Inkling, and the Evolution of Consciousness* (Christian Alternative, 2019), xx.

<sup>150</sup> Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 33.

<sup>151</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, 4.

For Bachelard, imagination augments reality. Reveries are poetic, literally from the root word *poiesis*, meaning to make or create. Imagination informs perception by expanding our perception of reality. With this recognition, we understand how reading, an activity typically thought of as passive and focused on reception, implicates creation and making as a natural part of reading. When we read, we create a narrative to relate to the text and ourselves. We might experience each moment of the narrative in isolation but the meaning holistically takes root in our bodies. The challenge for readers is moving from a sight-dominated approach to reading that apprehends meaning in isolated moments to a multisensory approach that champions the narrative created from imagination and memory.

We have the potential to overcome this challenge with a dynamic practice of reading that focuses on bodily orientation instead of solely on cognition. Cognition is always already embodied. Surprisingly, reading that emphasizes participation, where the reader inclines herself toward the phenomena and arranges its meaning in time and space, predates the invention of writing. My task is to recover the original impulse of reading without losing the qualitative experiences that result from new and emerging understandings of the brain's neural networks. Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers an approach to phenomena by exploring how consciousness and objects interact through a perceptual unfolding that results from participating in a shared world. Phenomenology emphasizes the felt experience of reading in time and across space and results in what Marc Whitman recently called altered states of consciousness. Reading does not just alter consciousness but expands it. Before I elaborate on how readers achieve this expansion, let us take time

to understand the problem of a solely cognitive approach to reading more thoroughly.

Instead of articulating perception in a way that confines it to a practice of evoking mental pictures or representations, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the affective aspect of our relationship to the world. Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience and always implicates the body. This is an essential turn from regarding reading as a purely intellectual pursuit. In a manifesto declaring how important it is to read aloud to young children, author Meghan Cox describes her experience witnessing a visual representation of the parts of a child's brain that light up with multi-sensory input:

The scarlet chili peppers that I saw in the pictures of these children's brains, indicating greater activation, were localized to the left posterior hemisphere of the brain, in a realm known as the parietal-temporal-occipital association cortex."<sup>152</sup>

She explains this part of the brain is involved in processing multisensory information, particularly visual and auditory input. The study indicated that children whose parents and caregivers read aloud to them instead of listening to audiobooks through headphones were better at activating their imaginations. Not only is multisensory input necessary for activating the imagination, but the results also point to the importance of a trusting relationship between the child and the caregiver as the foundation upon which children feel safe to take risks in their imagination. The reader's orientation to the text starts with their bodily orientation in time and space.

What is clear is that reading happens in the body. The reader and her text share the same air and inhabit the same world. Undoubtedly, our cognitive processes contribute to

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<sup>152</sup> Meghan C. Gurdon, *The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), 25.

our existence and how we make meaning in the world. Still, reading often emphasizes cognition with little regard for the experience. The body is partially forgotten because the body and mind are considered separate. Without the body, there are no surroundings for the reader to sense. Even when we can incorporate our sensations into our experience, Luce Irigaray points out that we often privilege mental activity as more valuable than our sensory experiences.<sup>153</sup> Without sensory input, we have nothing to observe or imagine. Without observations and imagination, we cannot order our experiences and create patterns for understanding. There are no images to bring inside the body and no ideas to communicate to the world. Reading is an event where interior and exterior meet. Without imagination, our readings would lack resonance. Without sensory awareness, our reading would forfeit feeling. The sensual body is constantly in dialogue with symbolic resonances.

Although reading is most dominantly associated with the sense of sight, I challenge that common association by pursuing a whole-body approach to reading. As Henri Bergson emphasized throughout his writings, memories are not merely recollected images, although sight does play an essential role in remembrance. Instead, we associate past images with present perceptions. The very experience of time, for Bergson, is the materiality of our existence experienced by recognition of sensory experiences.

Memories are written on the body. In an essay in Richard Kearney's collection on Carnal Hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur describes Bergson's articulation of recognition as a *un petit miracle* because "no other experience gives the sort of certitude of the actual presence of

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<sup>153</sup> Luce Irigaray, *A New Culture of Energy: Beyond East and West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 59.

the absence of the past. Though no longer here, the past is recognized as having been.”<sup>154</sup>

This articulation of memory’s influence on perception foregrounds the reader’s orientation in time and space. Orientation always implicates the body and layers of narrative history influencing the interpretive moment.

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Memory, History, Oblivion,” Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2015), 150.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **TRANSFORMATION**

The body is a threshold where transformation takes place. I discuss the particularities of the transformative potential that results from reading. Once again, reading is like breathing; it is a metabolic process wherein the body changes, but the body is always in the world. Reading is not just a passive experience based on the reception of a text or inhalation of air. A transformation takes place, and as a result, what we exhale changes the air around us. The relationship between the reader and her text is marked by mutual transformation and is characterized by interacting with phenomena and integrating the memories of those interactions into our lives. Reading transforms us, and in turn, we transform the world. The body is a threshold where transformation takes place. Whether returning from a journey or preparing for a new one, we inhale and process the air in our bodies. With reading, this process includes interacting with phenomena through attention and touch and integrating those phenomenal experiences into our lives in the form of memory. We are prone to ontological insecurity without the ability to integrate our experiences. This chapter builds on these ideas to explore the metabolic and symbolic transformations that occur when reading with a multisensory approach to the text and being attuned to the environment. The narrative we create to process our experiences is the design we communicate and share, which leads us to exhalation.

#### **Prioritizing Integration**

Haruki Murakami's 1985 novel, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, features a protagonist who divides into two selves after a brain operation. Unable to

integrate the experiences of either self into a unified existence, the story alternates between both perspectives.<sup>155</sup> In English, it seems as though they are two separate characters, although other the original Japanese and other translations like Spanish suggest each perspective stems from the same person early on in the novel. Readers of English tend to discover this as they read - some earlier than others. The Calcutec lives in Tokyo and processes top-secret information, while the Dreamreader wakes up in “the end of the world” with no memory of his previous life. The Dreamreader is tasked with the town’s job of reading dreams from unicorn skulls. The end of the world has a Neverland feel; similarly, time moves more slowly there. The quick pace of the Tokyo side of the novel keeps the reader turning the pages. The novel’s atmosphere is mysterious, although the mood is communicated differently. On the one hand, the Calcutec’s narrative reads like a hard-boiled detective novel, while the Dreamreader’s setting is sedate and dreamlike. What the Calcutec has that the Dreamreader lacks is something called embodiment.

Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing articulates the embodied person as someone who has flesh and bones, in other words, a corporeal presence. One way this disembodiment manifests is the way the Calcutec feels pain while the Dreamreader does not. The embodied person experiences bodily perceptions and feels a sense of cohesion between sensation and meaning, whereas the disembodied person regards these as separate and “purely mental.”<sup>156</sup> One of the most exciting comments that Laing makes is how an

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<sup>155</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>156</sup> R. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin UK, 2010), 69.

embodied person has “a sense of personal continuity in time.”<sup>157</sup> Unlike the protagonist in Murakami’s novel, an embodied person can integrate their experiences in time and space to form memories.

Integration takes the form of narrative; after all, a narrative is our human relation to space and time.<sup>158</sup> Cobley emphasizes a narrative is our human relation to time. He gleans this from Ricoeur, although Ricoeur makes it clear that his notion of time is also spatial which is why I include both space and time here. Mark Vernon points to how ancient civilizations kept time through the story, specifically mythological explanations that gave events purpose. Our ability to make sense of the events we experience gives our lives meaning. We do this with everyday experiences, whether going to the store or reading a book. Creating a narrative is more than attending to the details of our adventures on a timeline. The narrative tells the “why” and gives events their overarching meaning. It is no secret that the writer is typically given the role of the creator while the reader is placed in a reactive position to phenomena, but the interpretation is an act of creation. The reader and the text are co-participants in the perceptual unfolding of their interaction. She creates the narrative through invention and discovery.

When the reader interacts with her text, there is an energy exchange. She returns home from her adventure transformed, but only after she integrates her experiences into her life in the form of a narrative. Integrating this narrative, the body’s relation in time is the key to transformation. Without it, the reader suffers the same fate as the Calcutec and Dreamreader. Although they are one person, they live in two realms. Unable to integrate

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<sup>157</sup> Laing, *The Divided Self*, 67.

<sup>158</sup> Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2013), 15.

their experiences into a cohesive whole, little moments from each domain seep into the other realm to demonstrate how they are connected even though they lack integration.

There is a difference between recalling events and relating a narrative, but these work together to help the reader invent and discover meaning. Recalling events or details is akin to regurgitating information. Relating the narrative suggests the reader has processed the details, events, and information by interacting with the text and has found a way to integrate that information into their life. This kind of reading offers the possibility of transformation. Without reading for this kind of transformation, forgetting is likely to occur. You can encounter information without ever experiencing this kind of transformation, but what is interesting is that we cannot experience change without proximity to information. The body needs to turn matter into memory. Without proximity to the text, which is the interactivity of reading, it is impossible to process the information in the body, significantly inhibiting the reader's ability to remember what they read.

Repeating an experience, whether our own or the plot points in a novel, is not the same as remembering. Remembering requires a narrative. Freud famously differentiates memory from repetition in an essay called "Remembering, Repression, and Working Through." He explains how we are capable of integrating memories of traumatic events into our lives when we are healthy instead of compulsively repeating them.<sup>159</sup> Post-traumatic stress disorder is the name for individuals who experience severe pain with the memory of a traumatic experience.

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<sup>159</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-through* (1999), 151.

A question psychotherapists confront is the distinction Freud pointed to about the differences between repeating and remembering. How can talk therapy foster remembering instead of repeating? It was thought that when patients recall and recount their traumatic experiences, they are more likely to work through the trauma. Bessel van der Kolk's lifetime of trauma studies illuminates the difference between remembering and repeating. When a person experiences trauma, they remain stuck in the traumatic event and are compelled to repeat it. A therapist's goal is to disrupt this cycle of repetition, and traditionally, this takes place by helping a patient understand their experience with their lives. Instead of repeating the incident, they remember it. In a conversation with Cathy Caruth, van der Kolk points out that a patient experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder lacks the symbolic capacity to understand their experience.<sup>160</sup> He explains that trauma lacks integration. The patient recalls emotions, visual images, and sounds related to the traumatic memory, but these experiences are without context.<sup>161</sup> The terror they repeatedly experience remains outside of time, and the patient has no context for how the trauma they experienced relates to the past or the present.<sup>162</sup>

If patients find meaning through invention or discovery, they activate the release of the experience for the first time since the event took place. This means they find a way to integrate it into their lives by giving it meaning concerning other life events. This happens at the level of narrative. Talk therapy is based on the idea that repeating traumatic experiences eventually leads to this kind of integration. The goal is for the patient to invent or discover symbolic resonance; in other words, they need their

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<sup>160</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1995), 155.

<sup>161</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 155.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

traumatic experience to mean something as it relates to the rest of their lives. They need a context for their experiences to understand one event alongside others.

For Freud, talk therapy, an integral aspect of psychoanalysis, was a matter of bringing the memory of the traumatic event to the surface, which would effectively eliminate repression or suppression. The physician supplements the patient's recollection with analysis to help guide the patient toward the proper symbolic resonance. This happens at the level of language. A patient's repressed trauma or desire manifests in neurotic tendencies. R.D. Laing thought overcoming trauma helped to combat something he called "ontological insecurity."<sup>163</sup> He felt that ontological insecurity inspires a fractured sense of self, which is what we currently call *schizophrenia*. The root *schiz* means severed or split. Laing inspired Irvin D. Yalom to develop the group therapy practice, and its design had talk therapy as one of its central modalities. As individuals repeat their experiences in a group setting, listeners open up to ways of understanding their pain. A listener might hear another person's experience as they articulate a phrase that offers symbolic resonance and understanding. In the process, they discovery of meaning loosens the trauma knot and releases the patient from its control.

What is unique about van der Kolk's work is his articulation that "the body keeps the score."<sup>164</sup> This concept of physioneurosis is not necessarily new; after all, many of the neuroses that Freud discussed were bodily gestures like ticks or twitches. He does emphasize several alternative approaches to talk therapy that are being offered. Because embodied cognition and neuroscience elaborate on the physicality of awareness, thinking,

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<sup>163</sup> Laing, *The Divided Self*, 39.

<sup>164</sup> Bessel V. Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (London: Penguin, 2014).

and memory, each of his alternative healing practices emphasizes bodily movement. Van der Kolk prefers alternative therapies like breath therapy or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EDMR) to talk therapy. His preferred methods include physical movements, and he successfully guides patients toward releasing those memories through movement. Although, what patients do in talk therapy is also a bodily experience. When a patient or a person finds symbolic resonance, the body interacts with the material of language.

The key to living a healthy life is precisely what it takes to read in a meaningful way. We must read to remember by bringing the experience of the text inside our bodies by integrating what we read into our lives and allowing it to transform us. In search of symbolic resonance, the reader seeks to make meaning by connecting their experiences to a narrative that helps them understand certain life events. While readers must prioritize the integration of a carefully articulated narrative, there is no need to rush the articulation of meaning. Rachel McCann recognizes this when she acknowledges, “Attunement to embodied experience slows down the rush to meaning, allowed us to dwell attentively in the murky depths of embodied perception.”<sup>165</sup>

### **Carnal Hermeneutics**

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty implicates the body’s role in the perceptive experience and recognizes the sensory dimensions of language. Not only is there a physicality to language, but all perceivable phenomena carry this same

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<sup>165</sup> Rachel McCann, “Perceptual Unfolding in the Palace of Minos,” Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell, *Chora, Volume Six: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2011), 115.

potential. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is always participatory and rooted in our gestures.<sup>166</sup> The body constantly perceives the multilayered fabric of reality that Merleau-Ponty says creates the world. These layers include the environment as well as language and everything in between. Perception is the continual act of making and remaking as the perceiver interacts with phenomena in the world. His emphasis on the body in this early work is a point he elaborates in his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. This last work clarifies that the act of perception is always between two distinct but intertwining phenomena.<sup>167</sup>

Once again, Merleau-Ponty calls the body an anchor for the world.<sup>168</sup> Instead of articulating perception in a way that confines it to a practice of evoking mental pictures or representations, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the affective aspect of our relationship to the world. Invoking this bodily dimension of phenomenology instead of regarding reading as a purely intellectual pursuit and emphasizing the multisensorial part of reading sets my work apart from earlier phenomenologies of reading. My project moves beyond the realm of affect, though, because the power of reading is not only in feeling. The power of reading comes from relating narratives, and we do that through our relationship with texts. These relationships enter the territory of ecology. I am interested in exploring the reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text and liken this pursuit to a kind of nature study. Remember the water rocks beneath the boat demonstrating we always read in space and time. The spatiotemporal experience of reading contributes to how we

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<sup>166</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Psychology Press, 2002), 190.

<sup>167</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 261.

<sup>168</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

make meaning with a text.

The text is vibrant matter.<sup>169</sup> Although I borrow this term from Jane Bennett, and we share the hope to be continually surprised by what we see, I remain interested in the relationship between the reader and the text, not merely the text itself. Before Bennett, Paul Valéry offered the insight that language is the standard material shared by poets and philosophers. To regard language as material is crucial to my articulation of reading as an act of perception. What remains a challenge for readers is how to organize the experiences in a way that celebrates this movement but also retains the possibility of offering the reader the excitement that comes from reading literary devices like metaphors. If the power of metaphor relies on both shock and familiarity or dissonance and resonance, how might we celebrate these instances of difference and repetition? The answer is not unique to our appreciation of metaphor but implicated in how we read the world as a whole.

How might the reader celebrate instances of difference and repetition? The answer is not unique to our appreciation of metaphor but implicated in how we read the world as a whole. Lois Tyson emphasizes in *Critical Theory Today* that reader-response theories stem from believing that the text might ultimately lead to certainty.<sup>170</sup> This is a quality most academic disciplines pursue. Tim Ingold comments on how James Gibson explains that cognitive science and ecological psychology are radically opposed.<sup>171</sup> This is because cognitive science assumes a static perceiver whose sensory experiences are deposited into

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<sup>169</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>170</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>171</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2021), 181.

what I imagine to be a kind of interpretive bank full of life experiences. Measuring experience against these acts relies on a sort of decoding of pre-existing systems. Ecological psychology emphasizes movement and creates meaning by observing phenomena and developing patterns. These patterns are based on repetition and drawn from the perceiver's previous experiences, but much like the world, these patterns are in constant flux. For this reason, perceiving a design requires a heightened sensory awareness of the various textures at work in the environment.

The implications for reading are essential: once the perceiver has experienced multiple patterns in the natural environment, in other words, observing things as they are, the interpretive potential of the reader expands while simultaneously enriching the environment. As our sensory experiences with the text grows, our neuronal connections with to the text strengthen. As our memories with the text solidify, so does our ability to make meaning. Artist Olafur Eliasson says, "I make my day by sensing it."<sup>172</sup> There is a both a poetic aspect to reading but also ordering at work.

When we read, we evoke an image of thought. In the last section, I explained that we apprehend the image of thought as material with a phenomenological approach to perception. Reading requires embodied cognition instead of a cognitive approach focused solely on sight. In the following section, I continue to develop this argument by turning to carnal hermeneutics. In his book, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur points out that metaphors affect cognition.<sup>173</sup> Figurative language is experienced consciously, but as we

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<sup>172</sup> David Featherstone and Joe Painter, *Spatial Politics: Essays For Doreen Massey* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 125.

<sup>173</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: Psychology Press, 2003), xx.

have already discussed through invoking the cognitive neuroscientists, Alva Noe and Christof Koch, consciousness is a consequence of life experience.

Consciousness always implicates the body. In a collection of essays called *Carnal Hermeneutics*, Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor prioritize the body's role in interpretation. These thinkers advance the twofold movement of sensation and interpretation, demonstrating that these processes begin with touch.<sup>174</sup> Touch includes a multi-sensory experience. The contemporary philosophers included in the collection carry the torch from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception to Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics and relate these ideas to their respective fields.

Carnal hermeneutics embrace the body's role in meaning-making, celebrating both phenomenology and hermeneutics not as opposing tendencies but as practices already implicated with one another. Like reading, both phenomenology and hermeneutics are typically associated with reception instead of creation. Still, creation is an integral part of both methods of inquiry, and what's more, the act of reading demands it. It all starts with the body.

Aristotle calls thin-skinned people sensitive and perceptive. In contrast, thick-skinned people are ignorant, and Kearney emphasizes the importance of touch when he says, "our first intelligence is epidermal."<sup>175</sup> The sensitivity that Aristotle identifies and Kearney affirms has to do with how we discriminate between our experiences at the level of touch. Through touch, we come to apprehend different textures of our lived experiences. In apprehending different textures by way of attention and touch, we begin to create

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<sup>174</sup> Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2015), 20.

<sup>175</sup> Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (No Limits, 2021), 35.

patterns. This is a part of the process of reading and interpreting the flesh, which for Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is the intertwining of body and world. The receptive and creative act of reading positions phenomenology as a central field of study when exploring felt experience.

Carnal hermeneutics provides an opening for an ongoing interpretive posture on par with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. This means that reading is a perceptive act. Perception, for Merleau-Ponty, though, requires participation and starts with touch. In his new book, *Touch*, Richard Kearney describes how we are constantly reading and being read by each other's skins and calls the body a kind of book. I prefer to think of the body, and the self, as a text to include the etymological associations of weaving that conjure up ideas of the rhapsody in an oral culture. Kearney asserts that musicality is at the root of carnal memory. It is not just aesthetic pleasure, though, and Kearney invokes Bessel Van der Kolk's work on trauma studies in *The Body Keeps Score* to remind the reader that memories of all kinds are stored at a cellular level. Van der Kolk's research demonstrates how our primary traumas are lodged in our bodies.

Carnal hermeneutics is uniquely positioned to read the body as text. In "The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics," Kearney comments on how the emphasis on language that entered philosophical discourse with what we now call the linguistic turn tends to emphasize the book, reading, and writing as primary sites of meaning while sacrificing the body, feeling, and sensing.<sup>176</sup> In other words, the linguistic turn to the text was a turn from the flesh, and carnal hermeneutics aims to redescribe how these sites of meaning are always

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<sup>176</sup> Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 16-17.

implicated with one another. For this, we need both sensation and interpretation. He calls this pursuit a wager because of the unpredictable and perpetual nature of the task of reading flesh that never actually results in a permanent acquisition of truth or meaning. Kearney elaborates on the triple nature of sense so that his reader might recognize how broad the task of interpreting our senses is, reiterating this in *Touch*. So sense is apprehended in terms of sensation in the five senses, meaning in interpretation, and orientation in the sense of direction. To this end, he points out that we are constantly reading flesh, interpreting feelings, and orienting bodies, all of which are tasks of carnal hermeneutics.<sup>177</sup>

Recognizing the flesh of communication, specifically that the phenomena that we read or sense is capable of touching us back, is a counterintuitive approach shared by David Abram offers an alternative posture toward language that begins with recognizing the flesh of communication. This path gives readers access to the more than human world: “Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world.”<sup>178</sup> The tactile feeling of language is easier to apprehend when the communication is aural. Sound is, after all, vibration: “Hearing occurs when incoming sound waves vibrate against the eardrum and pass through our middle ear bones to the cochlea in our inner ear. There, delicate hair cells—a few micrometers long—convert the vibrations into electric signals. The brain processes and interprets these signals as sound.”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid 16.

<sup>178</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 89.

<sup>179</sup> Ellen Lupton and Andrea Lipps, *The Senses: Design Beyond Vision* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2018), 150.

Carnal hermeneutics foregrounds the body in the interpretive act that follows the reception of any experience. This kind of reading rejects static perceptions that lead to myopic interpretations and embraces dynamic perceptions in favor of active, living, and relational arrangements. That means we will increase our capacity for reciprocity in reading the text. With this in mind, Abram reminds us how primal this kind of approach is: “Ultimately, it is not human language that is primary, but rather the sensuous, perceptual life-world, whose wild, participatory logic ramifies and elaborates itself in language.”<sup>180</sup> What does it mean to recognize that hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, is not just a cognitive response to the opacity of language but a bodily reaction? We need a clearer understanding of the participatory logic that Abrams describes.

Ireneo Funes is the protagonist of “Funes the Memorious,” a short story by Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. Funes was in a horseback riding accident and suffered a head injury. Instead of experiencing the expected amnesia, he had perfect perception and memory.<sup>181</sup> His bodily experience was true and accurate, and pure in a way readers can only imagine. Borges imagines this kind of experience quite a bit. Several of his stories explore the possibility of a one-to-one correspondence between language and reality. Funes, for instance, attends to every leaf and tendril on a grapevine and every drop of foam that falls off an oar.<sup>182</sup> The precision of his intellect led him to distrust language to communicate his experiences. Language is not adequate to express the level of

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<sup>180</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 84.

<sup>181</sup> Jorge L. Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007), 63.

<sup>182</sup> Borges, *Labyrinths*, 63.

particularity that he witnessed.

Despite his infallible memory and perception, in fact, because of it, the narrator suspects Funes was not capable of thought: “To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions.”<sup>183</sup> We apprehend experiences and organize them according to similarities. We create patterns that allow us to order these experiences and preserve meaningful interactions. This is the logic of sense, and we call it interpretation. One of the most critical ways we offer order to our experiences is through narrative. Paul Cobley explains that “narrative does not reveal universality; rather, it has been instrumental in the promotion of difference.”<sup>184</sup> Funes could not detect a difference because there was no space or time between himself and his perception of the text.

Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero describes Funes as Plato’s perfect adversary because Funes sees with the eyes of the body; for example, his memories were linked to muscular and thermal sensations, while Plato sees with the eyes of the mind.<sup>185</sup> While Funes might be a model for readers to accelerate their bodily perceptions to enhance their felt experience of a text, he also warns readers about the importance of creating narrative and symbolic resonance as we form relationships with the text. These relationships happen in space and over time, and they are what give our lives meaning. It is not enough to enhance our carnal response to our reading. We must cultivate a carnal hermeneutic approach to reading if we are to move past the sight-intellect equation and read with the eyes of the body.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid 66.

<sup>184</sup> Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2013), 37.

<sup>185</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2005), 64.

This observation intuits the ways readers apprehend linguistic metaphors as flesh. All language is metaphorical; when we comprehend our metaphors as living, we see them with clarity so clear we can touch them. As Paul Ricoeur articulates in *The Rule of Metaphor*, living metaphors produce new knowledge. This new or fresh perspective surprises and delights the reader. Ricoeur explains how metaphors retain their appeal, or freshness, by simultaneously communicating identity and difference. The association of the idea evoked in a metaphor must have some familiar ground to land on before the difference the metaphor introduces can shock the reader. Ricoeur invokes Aristotle to demonstrate how surprise is how the metaphor remains “lively.” Metaphors work because of the tension a reader feels between what is and what is not. Dead metaphors still evoke an image but are so commonplace that we forget they are metaphorical altogether. In between live metaphors and dead metaphors are what Orwell refers to as worn-out metaphors. Worn-out metaphors are more of a threat to reading than dead metaphors. These ideas are used frequently and no longer evoke an image in the reader’s mind. Orwell thought this problem could be solved at the level of the writer, insisting that they work harder to use fresh images that will surprise and delight the reader. My emphasis is entirely on the reader.

It is a challenge for readers to organize experiences in a way that celebrates movement but also retains the possibility of excitement from reading literary devices like metaphors. Orwell dissuades writers from using dead metaphors in his well-known essay, “Politics and the English Language.” His definition of a dead metaphor is simply one that no longer evokes an image in the reader’s mind. On the other hand, living metaphors

evoke a fresh idea in the imagination. These images work by surprising the reader. For a thinker like Nietzsche, this is what a metaphor is designed to do: “For a genuine poet, metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but a vicarious image that he actually beholds in the place of a concept.” Paul Ricoeur likely has these thinkers in mind when he describes a living metaphor in *The Rule of Metaphor*. If the power of metaphor relies on shock and familiarity, or dissonance and resonance, then the reader’s multisensory experience with a text is encoded at a cellular level.

Neuroscientists often point out that when neurons fire together, they wire together. What that means for reading is that when we regard reading as an act of perception and start to invoke more and more sensory experiences that touch different layers of the text, the more embedded the text becomes in and for the reader. How these experiences cohere in a single person and the compound in a communal setting is how meaning is made. In *The Extended Mind*, Annie Murphy Paul articulates how these experiences that are apprehended through sensation are what make up our sense of self. “Among all other functions,” she writes, “the steady flow of internal sensations we experience provide us with a sense of personal continuity.”<sup>186</sup> This idea of continuity is what A.D. Craig, the neuroanatomist and interoception expert to inform Annie Murphy Paul’s emphasis on sensation, calls the “material me.”<sup>187</sup>

Perhaps philosophers avoid articulating their carnal experiences because they were unsure how to navigate such varied textures of experience, let alone communicate those

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<sup>186</sup> Annie M. Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (Eamon Dolan Books, 2021), 43.

<sup>187</sup> Quoted in Annie M. Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (Eamon Dolan Books, 2021), 43.

experiences to others.<sup>188</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein famously decried philosophy as not a system but an activity.<sup>189</sup> One of Wittgenstein's most potent convictions was that philosophers ought to ditch the grand generalizations for a more specific kind of knowledge production. When he declares philosophy is an activity of clarification, this is what he is working toward. For Wittgenstein, linguistic sensitivity propels clarity of intuition. The same complexity gives readers pause when it comes to interpreting non-visual experiences of reading, but that is because it takes practice. As Kearney defines it, carnal hermeneutics questions what it means to make sense of sense. Sense, for Kearney, is sensation, meaning, and orientation.<sup>190</sup> Reading, and even more than that, living, requires participation in receiving and creating the meaning of the text. More than participation in terms of response, when we read, we are in a relationship with the text.

Our potential to transform while we read amplifies with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's logic of the chiasm. In reading, there is an intertwining between two phenomena - not to become one - but to remain two participants in a relationship open to mutual transformation. It is not just that we extend toward the text when we read but also that the text extends toward us. Even when the experience of reading communicates a robust exchange of energy, it is rarely regarded as a mutual transformation. In *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, Joseph Campbell comments on the transformative power of myth that is only activated when felt in the body: "From the outer world the senses carry images to the mind, which do not become myth, however, until there [sic] transformed by

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<sup>188</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 20.

<sup>189</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>190</sup> Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2015), 16.

fusion with accordant insights, awakened as imagination from the inner world of the body.”<sup>191</sup> Reading focuses our attention on the interior of the mind, but “flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.” (Merleau-Ponty). The flesh is where the interior and exterior meet.

We strive to care for the text because of our connection and proximity to it. Richard Kearney qualifies this notion of proximity so that readers do not confuse closeness with fusion. When we touch the text, we are simultaneously touched by the text.<sup>192</sup> We must process this touch between ourselves and the phenomena of our perception by appreciating the differences between us. Kearney elaborates, “We do not dissolve into sameness. Proximity is not immediacy. Difference is preserved.”<sup>193</sup>

The way we apprehend this space is something Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulates in his essay “Eye and Mind.” Commenting on how space is always lived from the inside, he writes, “I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me.”<sup>194</sup> Though the reader might find herself immersed in reading a book, this does not mean the reader forgets how to navigate this space. Instead of speaking about the experience as though we are a third party with an eagle-eye view, Merleau-Ponty challenges us to give voice to the space and light that envelops us.<sup>195</sup> We share a common embodiment with text by sharing space. Our flesh and the flesh of the text intertwine. Rachel McCann mentions how this

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<sup>191</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion* (Collected Works of Joseph Camp, 2012), 31.

<sup>192</sup> Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 16.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid 19.

<sup>194</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 367.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

common embodiment leads to mutual transformation but challenges the reader to reconcile two contradictory urges: kinship and difference.<sup>196</sup> The reader, though, does not forget the difference between the story and the world because that difference is what gives us the feeling of being alive. This difference is what Merleau-Ponty calls a gap and is necessary for the reader to make meaning between two distinct but intertwining phenomena. Immersion is the reader's willingness to enter that story's world through attention. Readers do not forfeit the difference between themselves and the text's world. No fusion or identification takes place. Instead, readers recognize differences, articulate kinship, and relate a narrative they create by arranging the parts with the whole. Perceiving difference is why readers can create narratives in the first place. After all, narrative depends on difference.<sup>197</sup> Articulating this intertwining without losing the difference that the instant makes, the moment of perception is critical.

Immersion is the reader's willingness to accept that they are part of the world. This is not to say that readers forfeit the difference between themselves and the world by suggesting that we are all swimming in one giant primordial soup. Recognition of difference comes with wisdom and maturity. A child's understanding of the world develops when they realize they are not one with their mother and expands when they recognize the same about the world and everything in it. Their wonder grows when they know they are different from the world yet immersed in it. Reading with curiosity requires recognizing that we participate in the world we share with other beings.

The reader is always a participant in the world, and the text is always a part of that

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<sup>196</sup> McCann, Rachel. "Breachd Boundaries." *Log*, no. 42 (2018): 154.

<sup>197</sup> Cobley, *Narrative*, 30.

world. Rita Felski resists the tendency to subjectify books as persons by saying they cannot think, feel, or act.<sup>198</sup> This comes from a long line of reader-response theorists who emphasize the reader's role in activating the hidden meaning of a text. Sometimes that meaning is excavated through a bodily response, like when Jane Tompkins finds healing from a life-altering illness through literature in her book *Reading Through the Night*.<sup>199</sup> At other times, meaning is found by meditating on the images evoked in the act of reading. This is the aim of Elaine Scarry's work *Dreaming by the Book*.<sup>200</sup> Felski questions the nature of the reading encounter, acknowledging there are always intellectual and affective responses involved in the act of reading.<sup>201</sup> Reading is complex, and though it has been the subject of study for millennia, I agree with Felski when she says, "We are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts."<sup>202</sup> We need a more robust understanding of what occurs when reader and text intertwine to reach this end.

### **Attending to Details**

Media theorist Neil Postman distinguishes between the dystopian futures that George Orwell articulates in *1984* and Aldous Huxley's prophecies in *Brave New World*.<sup>203</sup> Orwell warns that an externally imposed oppression will overcome us. But in Huxley's vision, Postman points out how no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their

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<sup>198</sup> Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 17.

<sup>199</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Reading Through the Night* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018).

<sup>200</sup> Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>201</sup> Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 17.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin, 2005), xx.

autonomy, maturity, and history.<sup>204</sup> As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.<sup>205</sup> On the one hand, a totalitarian government controls all of the information.

On the other hand, they don't need to. Postman shares Huxley's concerns about the attention economy. Before smartphones or pop-up advertisements, C.S. Lewis wrote about the problem of distraction in the satire titled *The Screwtape Letters*. In this book, Screwtape, a fictional demon with a prominent position in Hell, writes letters to his nephew, Wormwood, and gives his best advice on ensuring the damnation of people referred to as patients. The haunting takeaway in this particular letter was that there is no sin too small to separate man from God. For that reason, Screwtape places distraction next to murder in terms of effectiveness. According to Screwtape, most patients lose their best years, not to strong desires for evil, but in "a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why" and by gratifying curiosities so small a person is only half aware of them.<sup>206</sup>

The antidote to distraction is hidden in the demon's critique: a person must discern *what* a thing is and determine *why* it is. By emphasizing the reader's body as the place of mediation, we recognize that through reading, we share a responsibility with the text to pursue meaning. We create sense when we seek an answer to *why* a thing is. Instead of losing a text in a "sea of irrelevance," as Postman feared, we apprehend our experiences of the text by placing them in a web of relations.<sup>207</sup> Lectio Divina, the ancient practice of

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<sup>204</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, xix.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 60.

<sup>207</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, xix.

sacred reading, emphasizes attention. Readers start with meditation and prayer before turning to contemplation. A reader inclines herself toward the text with attention characterized by meditation and prayer. This part of the reading process mirrors inhalation, so readers can think of the input inhaled into the body that results from a life inclined toward phenomena. Poetic dilation takes place in the space of contemplation.

The more experiences we place in this web of relations, the more we feel the sense of aliveness because each placement offers the reader the experience of poetic dilation.<sup>208</sup> This starts with reading as perception, a posture intentional about receiving and creating the world that begins with observing our surroundings and navigating the territory. The nature writer Tristan Gooley set up a school to teach natural navigation where he leads others on how to read nature's clues. Gooley correlates the sense of aliveness with what he calls "profound reactions" to environmental clues. He writes,

The more we perceive, the greater our chances of discovering something that triggers a reaction. The more connections we notice between the nature we observe, our surroundings, and ourselves, the more profound these reactions become. There is a strong correlation between the number of profound reactions we have to the things we notice in life and the richness of life.<sup>209</sup>

This is similar to what Marco Frascari emphasizes in his "Tell the Tale Detail."<sup>210</sup> For Frascari, the details are experienced separately, but when the parts come together and are experienced as a whole, the meaning of the building is communicated. We consider the

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<sup>208</sup> J.L. Chretien, *Spacious Joy: An Essay in Phenomenology and Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>209</sup> Tristan Gooley, *How to Read Nature: Awaken Your Senses to the Outdoors You've Never Noticed* (The Experiment, 2017), 153.

<sup>210</sup> Marco Frascari, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," *Semiotics*, 1981, doi:10.5840/cpsem198115.

details part of the whole to relate to the narrative. Although these details might interact with the senses differently, our perception never fully isolates the individual details of the building. Like the elements of the book or the notes in a musical composition, we experience the details of a building as a whole. Meaningful appreciation of the components comes later.

A point the anthropologist Tim Ingold emphasizes in his book, *The Perception of the Environment*, is central to perceptive reading: “movement is the essence of perception.”<sup>211</sup> Ingold leans on the insights of American psychologist James Gibson and argues that the environment is perceived not from multiple viewpoints but along a path of observation.<sup>212</sup> This requires an emphasis on attention. It is through attending to the text, whether that text is the environment, a book, a wave, a star, or a building, that we learn to attune ourselves to it in a way that provides the possibility of mutual transformation.

Allow me to return for a moment to emphasize the importance of recognizing the physicality of the text. When we follow Merleau-Ponty’s advice and regard perception as a point of contact between two intertwining phenomena, we might glean the most from reading. Instead of the reader converging with the author’s consciousness in an experience regarded as an event, the reader approaches the text the way Ingold advocates for his reader’s perception of the environment - as an ongoing attunement to lived experience. Ingold likens this pursuit to way-finding because this practice requires a perpetual attunement to the environmental movement. What that means for Ingold offers rich possibilities for our relationship to reading, specifically when Ingold says that “novel

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<sup>211</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2021), 218.

<sup>212</sup> James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception* (London: Psychology Press, 2013), 55.

perceptions arise from creative acts of discovery rather than imagining...” Unlike reader-response criticism, reading as a kind of perceptive activity is an act of creative discovery - not just imagining.

This echoes the careful consideration that architect Peter Zumthor brings to architecture in his book *Thinking Architecture*. There is a sort of singularity to the sensory experience that Zumthor is after when a person interacts with a building. Zumthor describes Italo Calvino’s appreciation of the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi. Calvino is known for balancing exactitude with the cosmic order in his writing. Zumthor comments on Calvino’s preference for Leopardi and is impressed by the attention Calvino offers the poet. The attention to detail on the part of the reader characterizes Calvino’s work. Sometimes attending to the details leads to a different sense of time and space, like when the backdrop of an experience is either in the city or nature. In nature, we notice the energy of details spread out over a vast landscape, and as Zumthor points out, the experience of nature offers a different sense of time. Converging with details in the natural world requires more time than the condensation of information experienced in a city. Attending to the details, which Blake calls minute particulars, requires space. In both the city and natural environments, the reader must apprehend the elements with a generosity of perception that starts with attention.

Anna Botsford Comstock wrote her *Handbook of Nature Study* with a declaration at the beginning that informs my approach to reading. She says that nature study aids in both discernment and expression of things as they are. Reading requires us to search for what a thing is and why it is, which requires attention. This is possible because a student

of nature must attend to the environment in a way that anticipates movement. Much like the student of nature that Comstock speaks of, the reader who develops a habit of attention and is attuned to her perpetually moving environment will continue to discover the world anew. This is why philosophy begins in wonder. Not only does she attend to what a thing is by considering it with everything in her memories, but as she observes any phenomena, she discerns why it behaves a certain way so that she can integrate that experience into her life.

This approach to reading encourages readers to attend to the conception of an idea and the way it grows. After the farmer places the seed delicately in the soil, the environment begins to correspond with the new arrival to create conditions for survival. These conditions are water, air, and warmth. The seed needs oxygen in a warm environment. As long as these conditions are present, water swells underneath the surface of the seed and breaks it open. The seed sprouts roots to reach the nourishing soil of its surroundings. These roots grasp their surroundings with all their might. Only the most robust seeds will survive this process. Once their clutch is tight enough, the tiny seed opens its vulnerable exterior to the outside elements. The stem reaches above the soil, and as long as light and water remain a part of the conversation, leaves will emerge, and the rose will grow. The beautiful deep red flower will take some time to bud. This process requires patience, care, and listening on the gardener's part. Attending to the life of the rose is no small task. No matter how strong, plant life is vulnerable. Although a plant's roots might eventually run deep, there is nothing static about its existence. It remains susceptible to life cycle processes. No matter what blossoms above the surface, we

recognize the unique journey of that seed with its surroundings.

Maybe Martin Heidegger was right about Angelus Silesius's rose being "without why."<sup>213</sup> Perhaps "it blooms because it blooms" and pays no attention to itself nor whether others see it.<sup>214</sup> Heidegger's declaration was supposed to offer readers the freedom to interpret art, nature, and beauty for themselves instead of relying on the artist to declare his intention or culture to decide its interpretative meaning. Rather, it limits the possibilities of the relationship between the rose and every creature who meets it. The rose is never just a rose and is hardly without why. The farmer who plants it and the child who smells it enters into a relationship with the rose characterized by attention. Perhaps the why will reveal itself to us as we attend to the rose's parts. Perhaps we attend to its parts only to relate one of its parts to a poem, a fellow flower, or a hue on our canvas. Every why contains layers of infinite imaginative possibilities.

There remains an ongoing dialogue between the parts and the whole. Education operates in a similar vein. Charlotte Mason challenges the adage, "Sow a habit, reap a character" by insisting the habit alone is not enough to take hold in a child's life. First, teachers must sow the idea that makes the activity worthwhile. In other words, the purpose for creating the habit in the first place is presented to the child through what she calls living books. Stories that offer readers life. For Charlotte Mason, living books offer readers a human touch, observations of an attentive mind, and narratives that create a dynamic culture. These books exist at a threshold in dialogue with the readers and writers. What constitutes a living book for Mason? The ideas contained within that

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<sup>213</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xx.

<sup>214</sup> Angelus Silesius, *Angelus Silesius: The Cherubic Wanderer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

surprise, delight, and stir the intellect. Readers are eager to connect to the details and relate them to their lives.

A more generous approach to working with materials resonates with the plan of Alberto Perez-Gomez in his book, *Built Upon Love*. In this work, he celebrates the poetic impulse to create or make with the motivating force of *eros* of *philia*, love, and friendship. Like Vesely, Perez-Gomez also likens the building to writing and reading to emphasize how each mode of representation offers a permanence that allows pauses and manipulation. You might wonder if this permanence notion contradicts my earlier emphasis on movement. It is precisely this tension that makes the task of reading so creative. While it might seem as though I intend to forfeit the representative role of language, that is not the case. Without these representations, we would have no material to read. It is in regarding the representation as perpetually creative and the text as a living organism that offers the reader the opportunity to read and reread the text in the first place. While much of this depends on the reader, the reader and the text are mutually transformed when these correspondences occur.

The mutually transformative potential of the reader and her text is an idea that Luis Fernandez Galiano affirms in his book *Fire and Memory*. In this work, he writes about how the built structure retains the memories of its inhabitants living habits and processes.<sup>215</sup> Ingold draws a similar conclusion in *The Perception of the Environment* when he affirms the importance of narrative in the environment when he says, “places do not have locations but histories.”<sup>216</sup> Galiano considers this a material basis for collective

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<sup>215</sup> Guillén Fernández and Luis Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>216</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 234.

memory, and in doing so, he challenges the dominant emphasis of the memory theater first introduced by Simonides. The idea here is that an individual's relationship with memory is spatial only insofar as they retain the ability to recall memories through visualization. But if a building remembers the habits and processes of its inhabitants just like the body keeps score in terms of physionomosis, how might this change the role of the reader who was previously given all of the interpretive power and potential?

One of the underlying themes in Italo Calvino's literary masterpiece *Invisible Cities* explores the idea that the reader and text work together to create meaning. Paul Ricoeur affirms this impulse when he acknowledges that "the city gives itself to be read."<sup>217</sup> This works within Calvino's narrative by admitting that visitors arriving by camel will inhabit the city differently than those arriving by ship.<sup>218</sup> Attention is inherently spatial, and there is room to get creative in arranging what we read. Australian novelist Jane Alison prepares readers and writers to absorb the forms of stories in a way that surpasses Aristotle's narrative arc. *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative* offer alternative metaphors for readers hoping to apprehend narrative architecture in new ways.<sup>219</sup> Instead of imposing an arc, she looks to structures provided by nature like waves, spirals, or cells to organize the inner sensation of reading. These various structures offer readers additional possibilities to arrange their understanding of a text. Alison recognizes the need to surpass the typical elements of fiction like character, plot, and place to unearth the tiniest particles that help communicate a story, like letters and phonemes. If you are Marco Frascari, these are the details that tell the story of a building,

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<sup>217</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 151.

<sup>218</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 17.

<sup>219</sup> Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative* (Catapult, 2019), 5.

but the details only tell a story after they are combined to create a narrative.

Some writers pursue complex narrative architectures that reflect natural movements in the mind that language makes possible. Henri Lefebvre called architecture a facet of the imagination that calls for *jouissance*. Enjoyment, he says, is the experience of joy, pleasure, and play that starts with the body and its rhythms.<sup>220</sup> In a recent collection of essays, *Cognitive Literary Science*, a professor of Neurocognitive Psychology, Arthur M. Jacobs, describes the sensation of reading as "a felt motionless movement through space."<sup>221</sup> The residue left by this experience is what Alison finds so utterly worthy of contemplation on the reader's part and directly challenging to the writer: "Once you've finished reading, that motionless movement leaves in your mind a numinous shape of the path you traveled. A river, roller coaster, wave."<sup>222</sup> Conceiving a numinous experience that might have a kind of shape, let alone complex narrative architecture, is challenging. The provocative effects of reading with wonder will follow if readers open their minds to experiencing a story in multi-dimensional and omni-sensational ways that transcend sight and sound. Attending to the edges of the text, whether written and easily discerned or spoken and momentarily fragile, the reader has room to think, feel, and live with the book. I employ narrative architectures to describe this relationship. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino advocates narrative without rushing to interpretation. He writes, "every interpretation of a myth impoverishes and suffocates it; with myths, it's better not to rush things, better to let them settle in memory, pausing to consider their

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<sup>220</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>221</sup> Michael Burke and Emily T. Troscianko, *Cognitive Literary Science: Dialogues Between Literature and Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 320.

<sup>222</sup> Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 5.

details, to ponder them without moving beyond the language of their images.”<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London: Penguin UK, 2013), 5.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### EXHALATION

“No constellation is as steadfast, no accomplishment as irrevocable as a connection between human beings which, at the very moment it becomes visible, works more forcefully in those invisible depths where our existence is as lasting as gold lodged in stone, more constant than a star.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Dark Interval*

Exhalation describes the way we transform the world. It is not the end, but it culminates the reading process before we take our next breath. This is where the reader responds with innovation. I consider reading, like breath, a poetic act. We read to make the world, and we communicate our creations with each other through conversation, education, architecture, and more. We relate narratives and cultivate humanity. All because we share the air with our text and we live with one another. This is a natural response to reading, but I see profound benefits to exhaling on purpose. One way I guide readers through this process of exhalation is by creating something tactile in response to the text. This chapter brings Paul Ricoeur’s ideas in *Architecture and Narrativity* into conversation with Kojin Karatani’s ideas on the will to architecture. What I emphasize here is that reading results in making and in that way, it is a poetic act.

#### **Narrative Horizons**

Paul Ricoeur explores narrativity through an architectural metaphor to demonstrate how meaning is made in space and through time, with the human as the focal point. His

articulation of space and time is not entirely symbolic like Bachelard's notion of the instant, nor is it thoroughly calculated. It is both. Ricoeur is interested in the mediation between "geometric space and the space unfolded by our corporeal condition."<sup>224</sup> That means his notion of architectural space is lived but can also be measured. It includes the space surrounding the living body and geometric space that might be plotted on a grid.

Similarly, he explores how narrated time is mixed and combines cosmic and phenomenological time.<sup>225</sup> Time for Ricoeur can be both lived and tracked. His notion of narrative time is the instant. Unlike Bachelard, the instant is not an absolute presence but also integrates past experiences and future expectations. Interestingly enough, this is how he articulates memory.

Ricoeur's notion of memory includes past, present, and future. He borrows this idea from Augustine. Invoking Augustine, Ricoeur teaches readers that narrative is about expectation and memory.<sup>226</sup> With expectation, the reader nods to the future, and with memory, the reader points to the past. Both poles of time intertwine in the reader's experience of the present moment. The faculty Ricoeur invokes to consider the present moment is attention. The way Ricoeur moves through these registers of space and time is not strictly linear or chronological, but there is a progression of a sort. Another thinker, French phenomenologist Jean Louis Chretien, has helped me understand this progression as expansion or dilation.<sup>227</sup> Ricoeur's focus on narrative offers a robust method of reading and highlights how important it is to process and integrate our interpretation of events

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<sup>224</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 150.

<sup>225</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 150.

<sup>226</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>227</sup> J.L. Chretien, *Spacious Joy: An Essay in Phenomenology and Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

into our daily lives. His model consists of three fundamental movements: prefiguration, where the narrative is part of everyday life or the lived experience; configuration, in which daily life enters the realm of the literary and the beginnings of order; and refiguration, in which narrative is read and reread by the reader.

The result is what Paul Ricoeur describes as the reading process. In his essay on architecture and narrativity, Ricoeur says we transform the text when we read by changing its structure. Each time we read a text, our lived experience conspires with symbolic resonances on the page. This reading is never passive reception but depends on our movement in time and space. Language moves, breathes, and has its being. Marilyn McEntyre describes this movement with breathtaking eloquence, “I am verb, not noun. Still, but never static.”<sup>228</sup> To read, we must move. The body physically and symbolically contains the narrative dimensions of our existence that constitute our sense of self. Questions of the self and identity arise and point to challenges for interpretation. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur describes the self as another who is a collection of stories, metaphors, myths, and images. We might think of these different elements that make up the self as stitched together like a song. As Christopher Watkin points out in his book *Phenomenology or Deconstruction*, the question for phenomenologists is not whether the self exists but whether the self coheres. According to Annie Murphy Paul in *The Extended Mind*, the material me comprises narrative continuity.

The narrative dimension of our bodily existence is precisely what Gail Weiss advances when she asserts that “the body is a narrative horizon.”<sup>229</sup> In the essay titled

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<sup>228</sup> Marilyn McEntyre, *When Poets Pray* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2019), 16.

<sup>229</sup> Gail Weiss, “The Body is a Narrative Horizon,” Jeffrey J. Cohen and Gail Weiss, *Thinking the Limits of the Body* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 25-35.

“The Body as a Narrative Horizon,” Gail Weiss points to the chiasmic relationship between bodies as texts and embodied texts. Language is the common denominator for meaning-making and expands with the sensual dimension of human experience. Linda Hogan acknowledges the way reading takes place with or without experiences traditionally considered linguistic, like gesture, stance, facial expressions and scent and that these communicative acts are sometimes more honest and comprehensible than words.<sup>230</sup> Affirming the body is a narrative horizon means acknowledging that our perceptual experiences have their horizons. She invokes Edmund Husserl’s work to demonstrate that “there is no such thing as a simple act of perception since anything we are perceiving appears against a dense backdrop of past, present, and future experiences.”<sup>231</sup>

Our perceptual horizons might be temporal, spatial, intersubjective, or imaginary and often intersect several registers simultaneously.<sup>232</sup> The intersubjective dimension contours every perceptual experience with new angles of meaning derived from the memories, attitudes, and perceptions of others.<sup>233</sup> These horizons offer new dimensions of understanding because every new angle provides an opportunity to make meaning. Meaning is never sedimented. When we read, we order our experiences and introduce several new horizons. When we read, we not only create order out of chaos in the form of an interpretation, but we also expand our consciousness by adding a new layer of perceptual experience. Every new experience provides potential for the reader to make

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<sup>230</sup> Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 57.

<sup>231</sup> Weiss, “The Body is a Narrative Horizon,” *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, 27.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

new meaning as they navigate their journey. Anthropologist Tim Ingold comments on this renewal and draws a similar conclusion,

Inside the book you are like a wanderer, following a trail through a landscape. You can only ever see as far as the next horizon. Yet with every turn, a new horizon opens up before you, while what was a horizon before is now ground underfoot or already into the distance.”<sup>234</sup>

With her groundbreaking work, *Philosophy In a New Key*, Susanne Langer also invokes the metaphor of the horizon.<sup>235</sup> She weaves C.D. Burns’ exploration of the metaphor in *The Sense of the Horizon* into her fabric of meaning-making to show that the horizon does point to the limit of one’s perceptual experience. “All thinking begins with seeing; not necessarily through the eye, but with some basic formulations of sense perception, in the peculiar idiom of sight, hearing, or touch, generally of all the senses together. For all thinking is conceptual, and conception begins with the comprehension of Gestalt.”<sup>236</sup> In “The Fabric of Meaning,” the final chapter of *Philosophy in a New Key*, Langer combines her empirical roots grounded in sense perception with symbolic and conceptual systems. This convergence is what she calls “the meeting point of thought.” We might refer to this as intuition, and as we move through space and time, intuition expands.

Reading operates with the logic of correspondence and includes both a call and a response. There exists a double movement at every juncture of the reading process wherein the reader brings the phenomena inside the body to understand it. Susanne

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<sup>234</sup> Tim Ingold, *Correspondences* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 217.

<sup>235</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>236</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 266.

Langer offers a model for understanding this process of thought because for her, meaning is created and not just mediated. A symbol is only understood when we associate it with an idea. We give birth to our own understandings. This does not happen in a vacuum, though. Each experience builds on the next. For Langer, every word leaves a trace.

Similarly, as we share experiences, our horizons broaden. There is no limit to how these perceptual experiences expand as long as we continue to move. This movement informs another metaphor that Langer introduces in her book: the kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope communicates the shifting backdrop of perceptual experiences. This metaphor is used to describe the way the body experiences music. Although she warns readers not to conflate the unique experience of listening to music with experiencing other artistic mediums, the perceptual activity that she describes is precisely the kind that will lead to the feeling of being alive. When we read a text, we use our bodies. We experience what we read in the body with the same dynamic and somewhat vulnerable process. The way Langer regards artistic representations outside of music is as though meaning is hidden in the form waiting to be discovered.

Most new discoveries are suddenly-seen things that were always there. A new idea is a light that illuminates presences which simply had no form for us before the light fell on them. We turn the light here, there, and everywhere, and the limits of thought recede before it. A new science, a new art, or a young and vigorous system of philosophy is generated by such a basic innovation.<sup>237</sup>

Langer makes a fascinating observation regarding how we experience phenomena as new.

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<sup>237</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 8.

Every act of discovery depends on the light shining on it in our field of perception. This takes place before the sun sets on our body's horizon. Although contemplating the illuminating qualities of light is a powerful thought experiment, the relationship the "suddenly-seen thing" has to the past in Langer's statement is crucial to our giving the thing form in the moment of reception. The theoretical physicist David Bohm explains that perception is based on tacit knowledge networks.<sup>238</sup> He advocates for a free play of ideas that champions the same dynamism that Susanne Langer recognizes as essential to the thinking process. Despite the sun needing to shine on the object for it to communicate its hidden truths, Langer acknowledges the body's experiences determine whether apprehending those truths will lead to a life of metaphorical rags or riches. Anticipating Bruno Snell's comment that more experiences lead to intensive knowledge, Langer writes, "The limits of thought are not so much set from the outside, by the fullness or poverty of experiences that meet the mind, as from within, by the power of conception, the wealth of formative notions with which the mind meets experiences."<sup>239</sup>

Music does not work like that, and I contend that reading a text is far closer to experiencing music than Langer thought. Langer writes,

The assignment of meaning is a shifting kaleidoscopic play, probably below the threshold of consciousness, certainly outside the pale of discursive thinking. The imagination that responds to music is personal and associative and logical, tinged with affect, tinged with bodily rhythm, tinged with dream, but concerned with a wealth of formulations for its wealth of wordless knowledge, its whole knowledge

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<sup>238</sup> David Bohm, *On Creativity* (London: Psychology Press, 2004).

<sup>239</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 8.

of emotional and organic experience, of vital impulse, balance conflict, the ways of living and dying and feeling. Because no assignment of meaning is conventional, none is permanent beyond the sound that passes; yet the brief association was a flash of understanding.<sup>240</sup>

Her training as a musician who has studied the cello and the piano informs her observations. After her body experiences music through feeling, there is a flash of insight and understanding. She calls this form and elaborates on it in her later work.<sup>241</sup> We might think of each musical experience as an event, which at least etymologically connects reading a text to listening to classically composed music. A temporal element to the bodily experience of listening to music informs her conclusions about philosophy's creative evolution. The listener's horizons shift with each new experience while they also expand. The key to expansion is in its relation.

In the introduction to her book, Langer admits to feeling as though she is writing at the end of a philosophical epoch. The end of an era for Langer is a result of static thinking.<sup>242</sup> Static thinking is detrimental to reading for life. It isn't easy to *feel* alive without movement and transformation. Ludwig Wittgenstein described philosophy as an activity, precisely what Langer advances. Wittgenstein thought philosophy ought to be an exercise in description instead of explanation. He even says the "object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts."<sup>243</sup> For Wittgenstein and Langer, the process of

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<sup>240</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 244.

<sup>241</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form, a Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*, by Susanne K. Langer. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953.

<sup>242</sup> Langer mentions that other fields, like science and technology, tend to expand when philosophical thought slows down. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 13

<sup>243</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2014), 52.

thinking and questioning ceases because we name our conceptions and allow these names to stand in for the thing in itself. We cannot think without seeing, which for Langer includes listening and feeling.

All thinking begins with seeing; not necessarily through the eye, but with some basic formulations of sense perception, in the peculiar idiom of sight, hearing, or touch, generally of all the senses together.<sup>244</sup> Our ability to read depends on our ability to move about the world open to the experiences of sensory input. “The limits of thought,” Langer observes, “are not so much set from the outside, by the fullness or poverty of experiences that meet the mind, as from within, by the power of conception, the wealth of formative notions with which the mind meets experiences.”<sup>245</sup> The horizon shifts and expands but our perspective is always fresh because we are constantly moving through time and space. The implications for reading are vast. Every book we read, by attending to our sensory experience of it, alters the landscape of our thoughts. In the same way Wittgenstein calls for elucidation of our experiences, Langer proposes a dynamic epistemology that seeks to “make things conceivable rather than store up propositions.”<sup>246</sup> These conceptions adapt to the ever-changing horizon.

Even though Susanne Langer established a clear connection between the bodily experience and meaning making, there remains a primacy given to cognition as though it were entirely separate from bodily experience. This primacy has trickled down to reading as well. While the affective dimension of reading has increased, the emphasis has been placed on the reader’s reception of a text. It is Gail Weiss’s exploration of the body as a

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<sup>244</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 266.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid 244.

narrative horizon that advances the role of the body by turning from the imagination to the body as a creative, productive force. This is not without hesitation, though. She is concerned that in turning to the body, there might be an overemphasis on intention being the only way to arrive at meaning or interpretation.

Because of its materiality, Weiss realizes the body offers a way to think outside of cognitive or emotional intentions. She asserts that the body is the omnipresent horizon for all the narratives we tell about it.<sup>247</sup> She does not deny the importance of the imagination; she even mentions Mark Johnson's claim that the imagination "is not a cognitive faculty but an embodied activity."<sup>248</sup> She is concerned Johnson dismisses specific experiences as meaningless if and when they do not fit into the constructed narrative.<sup>249</sup> To illustrate the body's role in meaning-making and to appreciate how all experience contributes to the horizon of meaning, Gail Weiss points to the ambiguity of the monstrous vermin in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. This ambiguity demonstrates how a constantly changing body refuses to accommodate the reader's desired narrative unity. This refusal is not a failure of meaning. Instead, these aporias generate "richness, meaning, and depth to our experience," an openness we might celebrate.<sup>250</sup> We celebrate them by recognizing this resistance to appropriation creates new memories and is the shifting horizon of new knowledge.

Ted Toadvine offers an insight into how crucial these aporias or indirect influences are for interpretation:

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<sup>247</sup> Weiss, "The Body is a Narrative Horizon," *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, 26.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid* 32.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid* 33.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid* 34.

The meaning of an expression is not contained in the words but rather at their intersections and in the intervals between them, in their absences and folds.

Meaning requires these interruptions and intervals, just as the words on the page require space between them, or as the phrases we utter require the punctuations of silence.<sup>251</sup>

Reading, then, “cultivates a listening between” and giving an ear “to the silent call between the worlds.”<sup>252</sup> Notably, reading is not only a personal, emotional experience based entirely on affect, although the act of reading does include these vital experiences. We begin with breath to emphasize the body’s place in the world - a shared world. Reading is like breathing because it connects the interior life of the body to the body’s exterior place in the world. Yes, the reader is transformed and expanded on an affective, personal level, but the body is a narrative horizon and carries rich histories of symbolic resonance. Finally, we cannot forget the way readers metabolize texts to influence the world. Readers share the air with the text and alter the histories of words against the shifting kaleidoscopic play of each narrative horizon.

“All knowledge,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception.”<sup>253</sup> This perception is co-constituted between the reader and her text, and this relationship always includes the atmosphere surrounding them. Connection is crucial. This is much more than a pedagogical encouragement to read strategically for context clues within the text. It acknowledges that every act of reading is an event

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<sup>251</sup> Ted Toadvine, “Biodiversity and the Diacritics of Life,” Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2015), 240.

<sup>252</sup> Toadvine, “Biodiversity and the Diacritics of Life,” 241.

<sup>253</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Psychology Press, 2002), 215.

simultaneously happening with other events and experiences. Rich histories inform every single text. Susanne Langer points this out as well:

Every word has a history and has probably passed through stages where its most important significance lay in associations it no longer has, uses now obsolete, double entendres we would not understand.... And through all the metamorphoses of its meaning, such a word carries a certain trace of every meaning it has ever had, like an overtone, and every association it has acquired, like an aura, so that in living language practically no word is a purely conventional counter, but always a symbol with a “metaphysical pathos.”<sup>254</sup>

The reduction of reading to only words and words only to representations waiting to be decoded is why reading has met such a tragic fate. Representations are communicative. Reading connects us to those communicative acts. Connection occurs in the body, with the environment, and through the cultural mythos and histories that inform the reader as she receives the text into her body. Through apprehending the text through multisensory perception, the reader is transformed. Reading is a correspondence between the interior life and the exterior influences, both direct and indirect.

This nuance highlights her aim to bring intellectual credence to artistic expression - its reception and creation. This starts with aesthetic appreciation. Our subjective response to creative expression is not something to dismiss but to appreciate. Her 1953 book *Feeling and Form* focuses on just that, although she developed this a decade earlier in *Philosophy in a New Key* by exploring responses that lie beyond discursive language.

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<sup>254</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 244

The logical 'beyond: which Wittgenstein calls the 'unspeakable,' both Russell and Carnap regard as the sphere of subjective experience, emotion, feeling, and wish, from which only symptoms come to us in the form of metaphysical and artistic fancies. The study of such products they relegate to psychology, not semantics. And here is the point of my radical divergence from them. Where Carnap speaks of 'cries like 'Oh, oh: or, on a higher level, lyrical verses,' I can see only a complete failure to apprehend a fundamental distinction. Why should we cry our feelings at such high levels that anyone would think we were talking? Clearly, poetry means more than a cry; it has reason for being articulate; and metaphysics is more than the croon with which we might cuddle up to the world in a comfortable attitude. We are dealing with symbolisms here, and what they express is often highly Intellectual."<sup>255</sup>

She explains that Wittgenstein, Carnap, and Russell see what is beyond linguistics as products of subjective experience. Experiences like emotion, feeling, and wish manifest themselves in symptoms of "metaphysical and artistic fancies." She challenges their apprehension about this by acknowledging that reason is a part of artistic expression. While it is clear that Langer has Carnap in mind in this passage, readers might see this as a challenge to the frequently quoted excerpt from William Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads that "poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Langer might agree with Wordsworth, but her work challenges the rejection this romantic view of poetry might have faced in the rise of modernism. What Langer offers is a way to

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid 86-87.

appreciate that reason and intellectual rigor are intimately intertwined in artistic expression.

What if this rigor has yet to take form in a creative response? Could we say there is even more to “a cry” if it were not articulated “at such high levels?” This is Heather Christie’s project in *The Crying Book*. What Christie asks of tears is precisely what I am asking of all phenomena: she wonders if we could read each tear to appreciate their communicative aspects. “I want the act of reading these tears, of placing them alongside one another, to make not story, but relationship emerge. This tear and this tear and this one.”<sup>256</sup> To read tears in relation to each other is like reading stars in relation to each other. We create the lines connecting one star to another just like we relate one tear to another. We read words this way as well.

Sign and symbol are knotted together in the production of those fixed realities that we call “facts.” as I think this whole study of semantics has shown. But between the facts run the threads of unrecorded reality, momentarily recognized, wherever they come to the surface, in our tacit adaptation to signs, and the bright, twisted threads of symbolic envisagement, imagination, thought -- memory and reconstructed memory, belief beyond experience, dream, make-believe, hypothesis, philosophy -- the whole creative process of the ideation, metaphor, and abstraction that makes human life an adventure in understanding.<sup>257</sup>

Early in her work, she mentions how difficult it is to understand another person’s feelings fully. Language often fails to give those feelings form because we do not trust its ability

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<sup>256</sup> Heather Christie, *The Crying Book* (New York: Catapult, 2019), 29.

<sup>257</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 229.

to articulate the complexity of thought. Even though she writes that “without language, there seems to be nothing like explicit thought whatever,” Langer suspects articulation comes out more accurately in artistic representation. What is neat is how she celebrates how language and symbols become co-conspirators of meaning. After all, “real thinking is possible only in light of genuine language, no matter how limited.”

Every word has a history and has probably passed through stages where its most important significance lay in associations it no longer has, uses now obsolete, double entendres we would not understand.... And through all the metamorphoses of its meaning, such a word carries a certain trace of every meaning it has ever had, like an overtone, and every association it has acquired, like an aura, so that in living language, practically no word is a purely conventional counter, but always a symbol with a “metaphysical pathos.”<sup>258</sup>

One of the ways I honor the words I read is by creating space for them to develop, change, and grow. I do not control them, but I harness their energy by relating them to my life and the world around me. It is similar to parenting. We give birth to a child and create an environment for him to flourish. We do not control his every move, but child and mother unfold together. To achieve this level of trust, we need a facilitating environment. We turn there next.

### **Facilitating Environment**

An intertwining characterizes the relationship between reader and text. Although the imagery of intertwining seemingly eliminates space between the perceiver and the

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid 282.

phenomenon of interest, that is not what Merleau-Ponty had in mind. For that reason, there is value in imagining the space between two unique existents. Although an intertwining can characterize the perceptive act, I appreciate thinking about the transformation that takes place through the metaphor of a threshold. Change takes place in a threshold and has spatial and temporal dimensions.

Anne Carson comments on the space between the knower and known in a consonant way with reader and text. “A thinking mind,” she writes, “is not swallowed up by what it comes to know. Instead, it reaches out to grasp something related to itself and to its present knowledge (and so knowable in some degree) but also separate from itself and from its present knowledge (not identical with these).”<sup>259</sup> This separation, autonomy on the part of both the reader and the text, is key to a reading practice inclined toward life. It is precisely what is missing in literary theories that explore the phenomenology of reading with an emphasis on fusion. The relationship between reader and text is like the mother’s relationship with the child. When the child and mother remain separate but connected, both participants have room to grow and evolve.

British psychotherapist Donald Winnicott continues to influence contemporary child psychology, an impact that remains profound. It started with his own experience as a child. Biographers describe his father as strict and distant and his mother as depressed. He recalls trying to brighten up a dark household, which led to his theory of the “good enough” mother. When children learn to compensate for their parents, it teaches them to be human in ways that a perfectly loving environment might not. Winnicott learned to

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<sup>259</sup>. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 171.

compensate for the lack of meaningful connection he felt. Throughout his work, he always emphasizes the role of the mother as that of most profound importance in child development. A child's understanding of the world develops when they realize they are not one with their mother and expands when they recognize the same about the world and everything in it. Reading requires a recognition like this. The reader is autonomous yet interdependent.

Winnicott's work offers several insights into the activity of reading. These insights include creating an environment that facilitates a reader's connection to a text and a more robust understanding of how an individual develops an identity with a text. Winnicott describes the facilitating or holding environment in his book *Playing and Reality*. To facilitate the child's development, a caregiver must provide the child the freedom to express their needs without fear of judgment, discipline, or punishment. This requires a highly self-aware caregiver. No matter how erratic the child acts, the parent must remain steady, consistent, and trustworthy. The child will develop a sense of security and trust as they navigate their world. If something hinders this trusting and loving relationship, the child will learn to compensate for the adult's behavior by being the stable one. An unsafe environment will also cause a child to hold back. They might not feel the same freedom to pursue their desires for fear of punishment. Mari Ruti describes how this situation results in the child learning to compensate for their parent's behavior:

The classic Winnicottian example of environmental failure is the mother who fails to be good enough, who fails to meet the infant's needs and fantasies, and who consequently ends up imposing her own psychic reality on the infant. Such a

mother does not accommodate but rather intrudes and impinges, thus extinguishing the infant's spontaneous aliveness. Winnicott goes on to specify that the False Self frequently develops in response to a depressed mother who, unable to recognize the infant, demands the infant's recognition of—and compliance to—her own depressive mood. In this situation, the infant is forced to masquerade liveliness in order to protect itself against the mother's psychic deadness; the infant reassures the mother instead of being reassured.”<sup>260</sup>

Thankfully, parental perfection is not required. As long as the parent is good enough at creating a stable, facilitating environment, the child will develop the life skills to adapt to increasingly complex situations. As the child grows in maturity, they will take risks to satisfy their needs. If the good enough parent grows impatient or exercises other so-called imperfect behaviors, this creates a challenge for the child, requiring them to learn resiliency and develop a sense of themselves. These stresses, in small amounts, are healthy because the child learns to rely on oneself instead of constantly depending on the adult. If the parent never falters and is too perfect in providing that patient, loving, child-centered environment, this also stifles the child’s growth. The child might develop a more narcissistic personality because they never have to overcome life’s challenges by creating a sense of identity with others. This facilitating environment is something we need throughout life. The freedom to work through everyday stress, deeply felt loss, or more significant life traumas all need a facilitating environment. The more minor strains throughout life often help individuals develop skills that help them navigate more

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<sup>260</sup> Mari Ruti, "Winnicott with Lacan: Living Creatively in a Postmodern World," *American Imago* 67, no. 3 (2010): 365, doi:10.1353/aim.2010.0016.

substantial loss.

The facilitating environment is something we need as readers—the educator functions as the parent in this analogy. When the educator is too focused on the reader performing a particular behavior or articulating a specific interpretation in response to a text, the educational environment creates readers who start to see education as a game to be played and won instead of an atmosphere in which to live.

We often need to comply with what Winnicott calls external reality. This happens by adapting our behavior to what is deemed socially acceptable. To adjust our behavior, we wear masks and create false selves, some of which are necessary for survival. When too much of our identity is overtaken by these false selves, we face existential dread and potentially depression. To live creatively, we must connect to and relate to others with our true selves and strive to be known, loved, and made to feel safe. Reading creatively is no different.

Communicative reading requires empathy that both Merleau-Ponty and D.W. Winnicott witnessed between mother and child as the mother meets the needs of her infant. This empathy is possible because mother and child share a space and the mass of bodily sensations that constitute each is exchanged in a reciprocal relationship. The mother-child relationship illustrates how body and interpretation are intimately intertwined. The body is the site of reciprocity on which the reader comes to a fuller experience of the text, not as a union of subject and object, but as two distinctly edged sensing beings entering a relationship together.

When a child has the freedom to develop because the parent maintains a safe

facilitating environment, their true self emerges. The first step of this emergence happens when the child transitions from complete dependence on their parent to transitioning their support to an object. Winnicott calls this a transitional object.

These objects are not about the object itself but the use of the thing. You might also know of them like security blankets. Winnicott says, “The object represents the infant’s transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate.”<sup>261</sup> This has also been described as moving from the subjective world of ‘me’ to the objective world of ‘not me.’ Winnicott calls the object a first symbol for the confidence the baby feels from being emotionally and physically supported by his mother. Throughout life, we integrate symbols with their purposes and meanings. Still, it is not until we create personally derived meaning for those symbols that they come to provide the confidence that the baby finds in their transitional object. Winnicott sees the transitional object as the conduit to creative living. When these symbols cease to transmit new experiences by providing the child or adult with the sense of fulfillment, agency, and innovative capacity for meaning-making, they cease to function as transitional symbols.

While the child is still dependent at first, the transitional object provides the child an opportunity to develop independence by learning to satisfy their need for comfort apart from their parent. They learn independence and begin recognizing their personhood outside the parent-child relationship context. Eventually, this leads to an ability to develop concern for their parents. This fosters interdependence and is how they come to

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<sup>261</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2012), 20.

love and show compassion for others. Instead of relationship needs being met one way, for example, the parent provides for all of the needs of a child, the child as a separate being from their mother or father learns relationships are about give and take. The child learns reciprocity when they recognize they are two unique existents. They develop a clearer sense of self after transitioning their dependence on an object for comfort. Adult relationships manifest this more clearly as each person learns to express and meet the other person's needs, but it starts in the family at a young age.

The true self is authentic and spontaneous and operates most clearly when the child is playing. "Cultural experience," Winnicott explains, "begins with creative living first manifested in play."<sup>262</sup> He considers the facilitating environment a kind of third space as it relates to the growing child's identity formation, "one neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality."<sup>263</sup> This third space is like a threshold where inside and outside meet, where the individual and phenomena touch, and where the reader and her text intertwine. It is the choral space — the space of play. Alberto Perez Gomez describes the space of contemplation as a choral space that both separates and links two participants:

In Aristotelian physics, movement was not a "state"; becoming, a property of life, implied movement and change. Indeed, objects changed their being when they moved; an ontological difference existed between rest and movement. Within this common understanding of reality, Chora could still operate as both a separation and a link, a space of contemplation that was a mode of participation.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 135.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid 148.

<sup>264</sup> Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge:

It is essential to understand that how the child develops trust in this space depends entirely on the reinforcement they were provided as they learn to differentiate themselves from their mother, adapting and evolving as they move throughout this space.

Play happens in the space between the internal space of the child and the external world facilitated by the caregiver. It provides what is both familiar and unfamiliar, allowing the child to grow in maturity as they learn to navigate the uncharted territory. He writes, “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”<sup>265</sup> Unlike Freud’s articulation, the imaginative space leads to truth and expands the psyche instead of repressing the truth in the form of desires. In this way, desire is a creative, productive force.<sup>266</sup> Winnicott describes play with the following vigor: “The essential feature of my communication is this, that playing is an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living.”<sup>267</sup> The reason play is so crucial to Winnicott is because it is in this time-space continuum of playing that creativity happens.

“It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living.” If perception is the input of sensation, then apperception is the conscious meaning-making that happens when we have an experience. Creative apperception is the freedom to make meaning. This is profound when you think of the obstacles we come up against in society that encourage us to comply with social norms.

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MIT Press, 2008), 53.

<sup>265</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 54.

<sup>266</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Penguin, 2009), 26.

<sup>267</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 67.

When we realize these norms are arbitrary and conventional and not a product of certain knowledge, there is a kind of existential angst that follows. When we learn to live creatively, we feel confident to operate with this ontological insecurity instead of reacting against it. This means that there is always a kind of ambiguity or uncertainty that we live with, and living creatively means making meaning out of our experiences. Winnicott starts with the infantile experience because it so clearly demonstrates the creative impulse in each of us to receive and create the world: “Creativity, then, is the retention throughout life of something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world.”<sup>268</sup> Winnicott refers to this creative capacity as conception, but he can think about it with the delicate nuance that is necessary to appreciate its profundity: “The fact is that what we create is already there, but the creativeness lies in the way we get at perception through conception and apperception.”<sup>269</sup> When we transfer these lessons in child development to reading, we recognize the importance of facilitating a reading environment where the reader might grow in their ability to care for a text.

This is a crucial dimension of my creative reading approach that rethinks material and space in a way that celebrates the human element without forfeiting movement or experience. Rather than experience the material world as autonomous, static, or stable, narrative architecture provides an ecological approach to dwelling that celebrates the life world that envelops the structure. This approach to reading offers limitless ways we might read or dwell in the space of a text. The key is that we do not dwell as a passive observer but as an attentive maker. Each reader is wholly aware of the dynamic spatial

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid 40.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid 52.

and temporal elements of a text and their relationship to it.

Each creative reading experience is like visiting a building and realizing that the material we are surrounded by is part of a richly storied world. Architects celebrate this when they notice the spaces they build are temporal and subject to all kinds of change. This dynamism is precisely what readers will glean from employing a variety of narrative architectures as they read. When we consider the way cultural experiences like narratives, myths, and symbols breathe life into material, we enrich our sensory experience with narrative in a way that will transcend time and space. We inscribe the material with memory that becomes a part of our lived experience.

The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre's most profound contribution to the conversation of space is the idea that space is socially constructed. We constitute space through lived experience. This is Lefebvre's point in his 1974 book, *The Production of Space*: "The user's space is *lived* - not represented (or conceived). When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one, which is to say, subjective."<sup>270</sup> Earlier in this section, Lefebvre associates the represented space with graphic elements whereas the conceived space is geometrical. Conception, then, promotes the idea of stability, which is problematic. He counters this notion of stability with a call for felt space -- an argument he advances in the book, *Rhythmanalysis*, and one he concludes *The Production of Space* by turning toward an emphasis on the body: "The restoration of the body means, first and foremost, the restoration of the sensory-sensual - of speech, of the voice, of smell, of

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<sup>270</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), 145.

hearing. In short, of the non-visual. And of the sexual - though not in the sense of sex considered in isolation, but rather in the sense of a sexual energy directed towards a specific discharge and flowing according to specific rhythms.”<sup>271</sup> Lefebvre is concerned not with texts, but with textures - the vibrations felt through apprehending a text in space, and this sentiment is an important undercurrent of considering space as a living presence. For Lefebvre, space is perceived, conceived, and lived.<sup>272</sup> I would even argue that this kind of living presence is precisely what a reader enjoys when they open themselves up to the creative capacity of language. It seems conception, in the way Lefebvre approaches it, is a problem because language is thought to represent reality rather than create it.

Space, for Lefebvre as well as architects, is a material metaphor. It requires a new mode of perception to experience the dynamism. Creative reading combines phenomenologies of reading with carnal hermeneutics to apprehend the vibrations felt in certain spaces but these would mean very little on a social level without considering narrative architectures. Narrative is a way to make sense of the world as a unified whole: cosmos instead chaos. Architecture offers a metaphor to communicate that whole - sometimes the metaphor is naturally occurring and sometimes it is carefully constructed. What this project appreciates is that narrative architectures are a way to make sense of the world which has the potential to enrich the act of reading.

Part of being human is the capacity to give edge to what we perceive. This is the focus of Edward Casey’s work, *The World on Edge*: “Unless they are infinite in extent, surfaces need to end somewhere.”<sup>273</sup> So how do we give edges to sensory experiences,

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<sup>271</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 363.

<sup>272</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 363.

<sup>273</sup> Edward S. Casey, *The World on Edge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 39.

especially those that arise from the act of reading? Edges are a product of invention, creation, and the human impulse to make. Casey affirms, “the role of edges is central to the drama of experience at every level—perceptual, practical, cognitive, aesthetic, emotional, intersubjective.”<sup>274</sup> Drama is active. To read with wonder, we need an orientation toward edges that regards them as living and dynamic. When edges function as representations, they are living containers, not static confinements. Lefebvre counters literary analysis with his notion of rhythmanalysis, after all, “Where rhythms are lived, they cannot be analyzed.”

Edges are both naturally occurring and humanly constructed. In *Architecture as Metaphor*, Japanese literary critic, Kojin Karatani, traces the transition from the human impulse for making or *poiesis* to an emphasis on becoming - the dominant metaphor for thinking that characterizes the way we currently approach knowledge.<sup>275</sup> His return to *making*, one that dates back to Plato, leads to a strange but enticing conclusion that recalls the purpose of architecture as communication. Architecture, *making*, or the *will to architecture*, is communicating with others. If communication is the end goal, then what happens when we build? Karatani carefully looks at the relationship between construction and deconstruction. When communication is buried in bureaucracy, a concept associated with the abstraction of information, we forget the *will to architecture*. In turn, the structure is on its way to collapsing. An appreciation of narrative architecture helps solidify what is communicated in the form, from the outer edges to the tiniest details like joints. This is why architecture becomes such a fertile metaphor for thinking and why it is

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<sup>274</sup> Casey, *The World on Edge*, xiii.

<sup>275</sup> Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

intimately related to reading. The container is always in conversation with what it contains, much like a culture's myth relates to an individual's everyday life. Marco Frascari recognizes this double movement in his inspired article, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," "Architecture is an art because it is interested not only in the original need of shelter but also in putting together spaces and materials in a meaningful manner."<sup>276</sup>

There is a rich variety of narrative architectures available to experience our storied world and although we attend to their details, we apprehend their stories as a whole.

Since Aristotle first taught us to use the narrative arc to construct sense, readers have organized the time and space of a narrative with this in mind. What the narrative arc offers is a way to understand temporal events through a spatial metaphor that signifies time in that a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but also communicates through space, with rising actions, a climax, and falling action of a story. Following the publication of the three volume series, *Narrative and Time*, Paul Ricoeur attempts to flesh out the connection between spatial and temporal storytelling in an article titled, "Architecture and Narrativity." He describes the narrow parallelism between architecture and narrativity that gains momentum through the configuration that arises out of the intertwining relationship between construction and recounting. He emphasizes this chiasmic relationship between architecture and narrative to highlight how narrative informs architecture while architecture also informs narrative. What is so interesting about Ricoeur's exploration of time and space in the context of narrative is the way these concepts are configured in the experience of memory. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost*

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<sup>276</sup> Marco Frascari, "The Tell-the-Tale Detail," *Semiotics*, 1981, 36, doi:10.5840/cpsem198115, 23.

*Time* is a profound illustration of this. That famous Madeleine cookie taps into something hidden deep inside the recesses of the narrator's mind.<sup>277</sup> It only takes the narrator 4,215 pages to flesh it out. The narrative architecture is communicated through ripples across space and time. There is no arc in sight and the narrative is that much richer for it.

It is clear that Proust's narrator experiences what Walter Benjamin calls aura and requires the convergence of time and space to evoke it. Reading both of Benjamin's 1936 essays proves helpful: "The Storyteller" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" describe aura as a practice that emerges in time and space and through the connection of soul, eye, and hand. The combination of both informs the complexity of what narrative architecture is after in communicating a spatio-temporal experience. On the one hand, we see time and space converge in the narrative constructed for an occasion. On the other hand, we see soul, eye, and hand come together in material form like that of architecture. Appreciating narrative architectures prompts the reader to find the right metaphor for the structure left in the reader's mind at the end of the book. It also requires a constant sensational awareness of each explosion of energy communicated between the reader and the text. This requires contemplation, which is not strictly cognitive, but implicates the body - the moving body in time and space.

### **The Will to Architecture**

Communication in the way I conceive of it follows the work of Dalibor Vesely in his book *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*. In this work, he describes the building as a cultural creation. Creativity, for Vesely, always invites participation which

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<sup>277</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time Volume I Swann's Way* (New York: Modern Library, 1998).

he regards as the context for communication, a sort of call and response.<sup>278</sup> He likens the relationship between the book and literacy to the relationship between architecture and culture.<sup>279</sup> With a more generous posture toward the poetic potential of architecture, we might reach the heights of our creative potential as a culture. We reach these heights by enhancing our sensitivity to our materials. Our tools and materials are not extensions of ourselves, nor is the medium the message. These materials are constantly evolving phenomena that require a new mode of reading, one with a poetic orientation that celebrates ecology. In *Ecology Without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World*, Christine L. Marran explores obligate storytelling across cultures and through various phenomena. This kind of storytelling is an invitation to read with a heightened appreciation for nonhuman forms of expression like the stone's sweat. This pursuit expands the reader's library to include the various forms of expression found in the world.

To read is to apprehend the materiality of linguistic metaphors and experience them in the body and between bodies. There is a tendency to exploit what we read, intending to extract information instead of recognizing the reciprocity of our relationship with matter that leads to mutual transformation. What follows this kind of reading is a surrender of sorts to let language shape reality. Calling for the imagination to be treated as a dimension of language, Paul Ricoeur realizes there is a close link between creativity and metaphor: "Are we not ready to recognize in the power of imagination, no longer the faculty of deriving images from our sensory experience, but the capacity for letting new

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<sup>278</sup> Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 18-19.

<sup>279</sup> Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, 14.

worlds shape our understanding of ourselves?”<sup>280</sup> The aesthetic force is not hidden in the image of thought or waiting in the text. The image of thought reaches its greatest potential when the reader and text touch - even collide. When we separate these phenomena without remembering their relationship, the fate of reading suffers.

For far too long, myths were mistaken for facts, just like sight was equated with intellect, but it is not enough to reverse their fortunes by regarding myths as fiction or refusing to trust what we see with our own eyes. We must have the existential courage to confront ambiguities. Simone Weil considers it critical to sit with contradictions. When our fear of the unknown motivates us to answer ambiguity with control, there is a failure of what Gaston Bachelard calls the creative imagination and a decline in what Mircea Eliade calls creative hermeneutics. Epistemic paralysis stems from our feeble attempts to control knowledge. Joseph Campbell locates stasis in language that we refuse to let move: “It all comes of misreading metaphors, taking denotation for connotation, the messenger for the message; overloading the carrier, consequently, with sentimentalized significance and throwing both life and thought thereby off balance.”<sup>281</sup> Campbell celebrates the right relationship with a metaphor by calling for creative mythologies. Each of these thinkers shares a willingness to relate to phenomena through reception and creation.

Gaston Bachelard says the dreamer dreams with ink, and it is with the same instinct for creation that the reader does the same.<sup>282</sup> My research explores the creative impulse

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<sup>280</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 164.

<sup>281</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion* (Collected Works of Joseph Camp, 2012), 31.

<sup>282</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Right to Dream* (Grossman Publishers, 1971), 45.

activated by reading that is preceded by attending to the cognitive and affective experiences. Robin Kimmerer reveals how Jeffrey Burton Russell's reverence for linguistic metaphors demonstrates this appreciation: "as the sign of a deeper truth, metaphor was close to a sacrament. Because the vastness and richness of reality cannot be expressed by the overt sense of a statement alone."<sup>283</sup> Proximity is energizing for the reader; after all, "Perception does not give me truths like geometry but presences."<sup>284</sup> The aim is not to explain the meaning with certainty but to describe it with wonder. The only way to describe it is by attending to the phenomena and carefully considering our relationship to it. If we agree with the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer that the artist is a discoverer of forms, then the reader is an artist - a creator. Not only does the reader discover form and matter as they move about the world, but the reader also arranges what they receive through sensory input by participating in their relationship with whatever phenomena they read. Reading appreciates this interwoven relationship between the world, the text, and the reader.

Drawing a constellation in the night sky is a human act of creation - what Japanese literary theorist Kojin Karatani calls the *will to architecture*.<sup>285</sup> We have an impulse to arrange the world in a way that makes sense. This is precisely what we do when we read - we create order - but the problem is reading no longer carries the notion of invention with it because we replaced the idea of reading as arranging with reading as decoding. When we read to decode a text, we extract information, but reading is about more than

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<sup>283</sup> Robin W. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 47.

<sup>284</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 14.

<sup>285</sup> Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

information. It is about the relationships we make with the information. When we conceive of reading the way Socrates does writing, the book is a preservation of artificial memory that is separate from the body. We rarely acknowledge how memory is rewritten with layers of experience as sensing beings move through space and time. When a text remains outside our bodies and is seen from a distance, it functions on the level of abstraction. As a result of this externalized knowledge, we can only ever react to it. This means we forfeit our ability to participate in the simultaneous act of reception *and* creation that reading is. As a building, the text is an architectonic product of the culture that communicates in a way that invites creative participation.<sup>286</sup> The emphasis on creation in the context of reading shifts how we approach it, but it is not enough to highlight the dynamism of the reader. We do not merely take from a book; when we enter into a relationship with the book, we give it life. This process requires a generosity of perception.

Our tendencies toward abstraction involve equating what we see with what we know at the expense of all other senses. When taken as purely a cognitive practice, reading remains tethered to the sight-intellect equation and suffers under the tyranny of truth as certainty. This is prime territory for deconstruction as a reading method. This reading leads to death and destruction and stems from ontological insecurity. After all, the word *war* comes from the German word, *werran*, meaning to confuse or cause confusion. The ambiguity that arises from living in a world that is not certain is attacked instead of celebrated. Chaos or disorder is often associated with opacity. When language is

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<sup>286</sup> Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, 18-19.

described as opaque, its enigmatic nature is resisted. Paul de Man nods to this when he realizes “the resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language.”<sup>287</sup> The resistance is to reading, but a very particular kind of reading that regards language as an abstraction. Words, though, do more than abstract reality. Through language, we relate to reality, and what’s more, language is real. This relationship expands the reader’s connection to reading, and my approach to reading aims to increase the vitality of this relationship.

We are reading any communicative act of expression, whether a book or a building, a piece of music or a gesture, requires a new mode of perception. Perception is inherently spatial, which returns the act of reading to its earliest etymological associations of ordering and arranging. When Paul Virilio points out that the invention of the ship indicates the invention of the shipwreck, we necessarily confront the implications that any attempt at order implicates disorder. While reading to make or build celebrates that order, the reader is willing to sit in confusion or confront the ambiguity inherent in language by studying the materials until a pattern emerges. Instead of answering ambiguity with a desire for control or a feeling of despair, creative reading answers ambiguity with a willingness to make order out of chaos - a move that requires existential courage in the face of ambiguity.<sup>288</sup> There is a return to reading as an act of arrangement. The way we read when we privilege sight above all other sensory experiences leads to stasis which is a kind of death: the death of ideas, the death of the imagination, and the death of truth. Rather than privilege sight, this approach privileges touch - even touching

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<sup>287</sup> Paul De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 12.

<sup>288</sup> Simone D. Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road Media, 2018), 29-30.

at a distance. Through the touch activated by reading, energy is exchanged. Every word of this project is chasing enlivenment in the practice of reading. Andreas Weber articulates enlivenment as a shared dimension of aliveness between phenomena. This means that there is life-energy between the reader and the book.

As I mentioned, the earliest definitions of the word *read* point to how a person arranges knowledge instead of decoding marks on a page. If we are to reorient our reading practices, returning to this ordering of material is necessary. Paul Valery calls language the standard material of poets and philosophers. The text is a language container, words are containers of energy, and the poetic imagination creates structures from these materials. Words construct our worlds, but they do not work alone. Words require the reader's participation. Reading requires participation; even if the fruit of that participation does not appear right away through art or conversation, the emphasis is there. With an increased sensitivity to felt experience, readers will be made aware of the interchange in the act of reading between the body, the book, the imagination, the author, the community, and the world.

## CHAPTER SIX

### READING THE BREATH OF LIFE

#### Reading Breath

Breathing is the quintessential primordial gesture, a continuing action that coincides with life itself. When we remember our breath, we are reminded of our autonomy and interdependence at the same time. Reading and breath operate with a rhythmic exchange of energy characterized by inhalation and exhalation. Every breath fulfills the biological necessity of bringing air into the lungs to exchange it for a gas that we then send back out into the world. At the same time that we appreciate the biological necessity of our bodies transforming oxygen into carbon dioxide, we recognize the symbolic resonances that breath offers to our existence.

Our relationship to breath is like our relationship to reading: the process starts by bringing the text inside the body, a transformation takes place, then the text influences our daily lives, and finally, it manifests in the world around us. It is an event that takes place in an instant. The Hebrew word *dabar* translates to “word” and carries the meaning “event.” Events, like words, take on meaning with other events, or other words.

Jean-Louis Chretien emphasizes that the air or space surrounding an event is what gives it meaning: “To breathe an event does not mean breathing it as an isolated event. It means breathing the atmosphere and environment in which it unfolds and acquires meaning. It means breathing its connection to other events.”<sup>289</sup> We read texts by bringing them into

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<sup>289</sup> J.L. Chretien, *Spacious Joy: An Essay in Phenomenology and Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 72.

our bodies through sensory perception. The focus is not on consuming information but on attending to and caring for the details of the text while immersing ourselves in the entire event of reading. Each text is enriched and made more meaningful as we consider it alongside the next.

Reading is like breathing; it is a metabolic process wherein the body is changed, but the body is always in the world. Reading is not just a passive experience based on the reception of a text or inhalation of air. A transformation takes place, and as a result, what we exhale changes the air around us. Reading transforms us, and in turn, we transform the world.

Reading, like breath, energizes our spirit, orders our imagination, vocalizes our uniqueness, expands our horizons, and culminates in enlivenment. We metabolize the text. It transforms inside our bodies, changing us as readers, influencing how we apprehend every text thereafter. This happens at a cellular level. Every time we read, our brains are rewired and neural pathways are altered. The memories are encoded and we are forever changed. As transformed beings, we then enact change in the world just by being in the world. Our zoe, our biological life, and our bios, the biographical events that create our unique existence, are both implicated in this life-world. We process what we read in the body, which inclines us toward life.

Reading is often described as an instrument and sometimes considered a technology, but I have yet to see it correspond to something as intimate as breath.<sup>290</sup> This air envelops every textual encounter that we share. As two unique existents, you and I breathe

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<sup>290</sup> Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, 13.

together, one forming another, in a symbiotic relationship. This is precisely what happens when we read. A reading practice that inclines us toward life starts with the breath. We begin with the breath. We beget with breath. In her essay, “The Way of Breath,” Luce Irigaray calls breath “the first autonomous gesture of the living human being.”<sup>291</sup> Perhaps reading is a close second.

There is an essential theoretical move I witnessed in a recent approach to phenomenology that is a great starting point for this discussion. This move was placed at the end of the first of fifty chapters on the subject of “critical phenomenology.” In describing the phenomenological method, Duane H. Davis explains the contributions of Edmund Husserl. At the end of the chapter, he turns Husserl’s famous maxim, *all subjectivity is intersubjectivity*, on its head. Instead, he offers *all intersubjectivity is subjectivity*.<sup>292</sup> Reading provides us with a way to explore the tension between that subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

As we interact with phenomena through reading, we continue to make and remake ourselves. The activity of breathing offers several parallel metaphors for understanding our unique relationship to reading. Not only that, but exploring breath alongside reading highlights the bodily, spiritual, and cultural transformation that occurs when we read. This introduces the reader to the relationship between reading and breathing to demonstrate the need for the reader’s participation.

The first part of the transformation involves the change inside ourselves. The second

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<sup>291</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 73.

<sup>292</sup> Duane H. Davis, “The Phenomenological Method,” in *50 Concepts For a Critical Phenomenology*, eds. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salmon ((Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 8.

part of the transformative process concerns the shift in nature. We literally change the world by reading just like when the air we exhale returns to the world. The air returns to the world anew, offering possibilities for transformation with others through connection, order, and ultimately, remembrance. These qualities are shared. Not only do they make up our communities, but they are also how we cultivate humanity. When we read, we transform the external world by sharing details of our internal transformations. This is how we create culture. Reading is a process of making.

Just like it is impossible to breathe by only inhaling, no reader is an island. Every time we read, we experience an internal transformation where we are altered by the phenomena we bring into our bodies. It is impossible to read without acknowledging the way the interior and exterior meet. Reading is an intentional interactivity with the text, but understanding the intricacies of this interactive relationship is the subject of this dissertation.

Reading is an act of perception. By way of perception, we interact with phenomena. We receive input and create meaning. The phenomena we call a text changes within the body before the reader sends it back out into the world. Sometimes what we read is in the form of a book, but not always. We read anything from stars to water to a building. Each text is woven together by the stories they tell. These stories are made up of matter and memory, myth and desire. The phenomena that we read communicates lived experience. No matter the form the text takes, the input we receive when we encounter the text changes us upon reception. We wear these changes on our skin as we meet and share with others in the world.

When the journalist Steve Paulson joins Andreas Weber for a walk in the Grunewald Forest, he asks “Does the wind feel alive to you?”<sup>293</sup> Andreas Weber, without hesitation, responds, “Absolutely. I'm feeling the wind as the epitome of our common breath. It's a tender experience, like it's caressing your skin and you hear its whispering.”<sup>294</sup> Weber's response communicates heightened sensory awareness that starts with sharing the air and extends to touch and hearing. He describes this communication as shared perception:

As a movement in the atmosphere, it's the chamber of exchange between my body and the body of the plants. What I exhale is what they eat, and what they breathe out is what I need to breathe in to exist. So it's a reminder that this substance that we don't normally pay attention to is truly the shared substance of our bodies.<sup>295</sup>

Breath is considered the shared substance of two bodies in conversation. It is not typical to think of reading as a substance at all, but every time we read, we transform our bodies at a cellular level. Every time we interact, we are expressing those transformations, for better or worse. Breathing and reading are alike in that both actions mediate between the visible, external world and the invisible, internal world. Reading, like breathing, is characterized by a double movement that joins together internal and external phenomena but leaves them separate after the interaction.

Through breathing, we are reminded of our separation from others. It is also the case that through breathing, we are reminded of our responsibility to others. Simone Weil famously invokes the Platonic notion of *metaxu* to emphasize that “every separation is a

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<sup>293</sup> Steve Paulson, "Biologist And Philosopher Andreas Weber On Finding Love In The Ecosystem," Wisconsin Public Radio, last modified May 8, 2020, <https://www.wpr.org/biologist-and-philosopher-andreas-weber-finding-love-ecosystem>.

<sup>294</sup> Paulson, "Biologist And Philosopher Andreas Weber On Finding Love In The Ecosystem."

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

link.”<sup>296</sup> It is important to note that link is not synonymous with fusion. Two do not become one. Luce Irigaray calls air the substance of the copular and proclaims philosophy dies without air.<sup>297</sup> The air is shared but our capacity for breathing, for perceiving as for reading, is what constitutes our uniqueness. Not only does Irigaray remember the air we share and the breath exchanged between two persons, she also recognizes that it is only between two that love is ever possible.<sup>298</sup> This emphasis on two affirms that reading, like breathing, is an ethical endeavor and is practiced with others.

## **Being Two**

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl emphasizes that “The salvation of man is through love and in love.”<sup>299</sup> Despite being imprisoned by Nazis in a concentration camp, he credits the hope he carried for being reunited with his wife for his survival. He found meaning in the darkest imaginable circumstances, and it gave him something to live for. Living in this context is not about surviving, although that was an accomplishment in itself considering his circumstances. It has more to do with interoception, the feeling of being alive. This feeling arises out of meaningful connections and is at the heart of logotherapy, the method of healing Frankl advocated in his psychotherapy after surviving the concentration camps. Finding meaning inspired him to live with an attitude of hope rather than suffering. He would go on to inspire millions of readers, not only because he survived imprisonment, but because he found meaning and purpose in his relationship

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<sup>296</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace: By Simone Weil* (Routledge, 2002), 145.

<sup>297</sup> Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>298</sup> Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>299</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 35.

with his wife and what he felt like was a call to give his message to others. The lesson for readers and one that is seldom recognized is that meaning is found in the relationship between two.

Martin Buber articulates a relational ontology in *I and Thou* that recognizes the unique existence and the profundity of the relationship between two distinct subjects. It is through our relationship with another that we find meaning. Gaston Bachelard acknowledges how critical it is for us to distinguish ourselves from the phenomena we choose to consider in his preface to Buber's book:

What do flowers and trees matter to me, and fire and stones, if I am without love and without a home! We must be two—or at least, alas! we must have been two—in order to comprehend a blue sky, to name a sunrise! Infinite things such as sky, forest, and light find their names only in a loving heart. And the breeze of plains, its gentleness and its palpitation, is first of all the echo of a tender sigh. Thus the human soul, enriched with a chosen love, vivifies great things before little ones. The soul says thou to the universe right after it feels the human exaltation of the thou.<sup>300</sup>

Bachelard apprehends the physical world with elegance and appreciation that is unique to his reading posture. He describes this posture as one of poetic reverie. It is never passive. The active participation that reading calls for starts with appreciating our relationship to the text. We do not become one with the text, but we enter into an intimate relationship with it through reading. We bring the text into our bodies through sensory perception, but

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<sup>300</sup> Eileen Rizo-Patron, Edward S. Casey, and Jason M. Wirth, *Adventures in Phenomenology: Gaston Bachelard* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 273.

this is not a permanent acquisition. The activity of reading is temporary, but before I expand on the temporal elements, the notion of two-ness requires a short detour to think about the reader's relationship to space. Reading happens through the double movement of disconnection and connection. In other words, the relationship between the reader and the text must be two.

Immersing ourselves in a good book is still possible, but we must be more careful articulating the relationship between ourselves and the text. In the words of Maurice Blanchot, "the space of literature" is indeed autonomous, but we apprehend that space through care and protection.<sup>301</sup> Whereas the autonomy of Blanchot's notion of space results in death because we are disconnected, the autonomy of literature as I conceive of it provides the opportunity for us to cultivate a meaningful relationship to the text through hospitality, care, and protection. The distance is critical for creating the relationship. We relate to it through a common embodiment.

Rachel McCann mentions how this common embodiment leads to mutual transformation but challenges the reader to reconcile two contradictory urges: kinship and difference.<sup>302</sup> The reader, though, does not forget the difference between the story and the world because that difference and the meaning we derive from it is what gives life. This difference is what Merleau-Ponty calls a gap. Immersion is the reader's willingness to enter that story's world by allowing that story's world to enter her (I need help wording this). This is not to say that readers forfeit the difference between themselves and the

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<sup>301</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature: A Translation of "l'Espace Littéraire"* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

<sup>302</sup> Rachel McCann, "Breached Boundaries," *Disorienting Phenomenology* 42 (Winter 2018): 154, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44840737>.

world and become one with the text. A recognition of this difference comes with wisdom and maturity. This perception of this difference is why readers can create narratives in the first place.

This emphasis on two is a point that Luce Irigaray recognizes as well in her work, *To Be Two*. She describes a need to refine the bodily experience that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes by offering a perspective that celebrates the feminine experience naturally and culturally.<sup>303</sup> This uniquely feminine experience is maternal in that consciousness expands in tandem with language, just like a child's relationship with language develops in tandem with her caregiver. Merleau-Ponty points out this in his lectures on the child's relation with others. As perception opens up - in other words, as the body and mind experience the world - the child acquires language to articulate their experience. According to Irigaray, the uniquely feminine perspective of the body is lacking in philosophical discourse, which means that language is also limited. In other words, language offers texture to our existence, and our unique experiences open up new dimensions in language. There is perpetual reciprocity to the perceiver's relationship with phenomena by which both perceiver and phenomena are mutually transformed.

When we remember the air, an element that Luce Irigaray regards as a divine feminine spirit, we pursue an interpretation that loosens the tension in the space between the reader and her text—reading, like breathing, crafts our soul. It is a spiritual practice that we must cultivate and protect. We do this when we enact a posture of inclination, an orientation toward life and others that perpetuates life.

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<sup>303</sup> Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (London: Routledge, 2017)..

At the same time, and just like breathing, reading is a gift and a skill to cultivate and protect without suffocating it. In other words, just like Weber and Paulson share the air in conversation, they remain two distinct beings. Neither envelops the other through conversation. Remaining two is not only necessary when we share the air, but also when we read. Even though we bring the text inside our bodies and welcome the transformation, we remain two. “To remain between two,” Luce Irigaray writes, “requires the renunciation of this sort of unity: fusional, regressive, autistic, narcissistic.”<sup>304</sup> There is a fierce autonomy at work here. When the reader learns to approach a text with the kind of love that Irigaray describes in *To Be Two*, she receives the experience as a gift. Luce Irigaray elaborates on this:

I do not want to renounce my sensible perceptions of you, those certainties which bring me consolation. Touched by you, by lights, by sounds, by forms and colors, I try to preserve this gift without appropriating it. I receive it as a guide for my becoming, an aid for advancing along my journey.<sup>305</sup>

The gift of breath, just like the gift of reading, nourishes our subjectivity. Jean Luc Nancy explores how breath shapes the open pores of our skin as we inhale:

Skin develops the breath, elan, push, and vibration of the body. If the soul is the form of a living body, the skin conforms to this form: it turns pale or blushes with it, it's made smooth or rough, it shudders, its hairs stand on end, and it's shaped by its inclinations, elevations, and folds. The skin tightens, relaxes, creases, and toughens. It is modified, varies in thickness and suppleness, tends to be more like

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<sup>304</sup> Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 57.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid* 61.

leather or integument, like a film (thin skin) or a membrane (the envelopment of a limb or a part of the body). It becomes humid and full of mucous and invaginates, lips giving way to a gorge, a trench, an access road or exit. The “skinned” is developed by its envelopment; its nostrils breathe, its pores perspire, its sphincters tighten and loosen, its eyelids disclose or conceal the world, the cartilage of the ears vibrate, and the sex swells and reveals intimate flesh, without being skinned, without cruelty, raw and smooth.<sup>306</sup>

Reading contours our skin in similarly vulnerable and completely compromising ways. When I began to consider how reading begins with and parallels breath, I wondered how we could preserve the gift of reading without appropriating it? How do we receive what we read as a guide for becoming more autonomous beings to advance along our journey? The answers to these questions start with recognizing that my body is a narrative horizon: autonomous, interdependent, and very much alive.

Luce Irigaray celebrates how two distinct phenomena can enter into a relationship of love, generosity, and mutual reciprocity. This takes place in the space between two. In earlier renderings of the reader’s relationship with the text, this space between the reader and the text disappeared. It is precisely this space that invites mutual transformation. Without honoring this space, there can be no reciprocity between perceiver and phenomena. When I imagine this space, I think of a threshold. The host, or the reader, invites the text, which for this analogy is the traveler, into their home. The host is open and hospitable and greets the text with a generous perception. I think about the Ancient

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<sup>306</sup> Jean Luc Nancy, “Rethinking Corpus,” Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2015), 79.

Greek term *xenia* and how reading might require radical hospitality. Carson elaborates on the nature of this hospitable, loving, generous space, “In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible to difference. It is an erotic space.”<sup>307</sup>

### **Divine Perception**

In Greek mythology, Daedalus is considered the first pre-classical architect.<sup>308</sup> His name means to work artfully. He designed the labyrinth in Knossos for King Minos of Crete to imprison the Minotaur, but some question whether he ever understood its structure. Beatriz Colomina proposed a creative revision to architectural history when she awards Ariadne the honor of achieving the first architectural act since “it was she who gave Theseus the ball of thread by means of which he found his way out of the labyrinth after having killed the minotaur.”<sup>309</sup> Aware of the relationship between parts and the whole, the architect, like the reader, leverages divine perception.

The architect is often compared to the writer as though they are moving the strings, but Ariadne suggests otherwise. The reader is responsible for discerning the clues before her and acting accordingly. She lives with the phenomena and learns to navigate her way in the world. The string Ariadne gave Theseus to guide him out of the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur is called a “clew of thread” and is where we get the meaning for the word “clue” that helps us solve a mystery. Ariadne’s ability to give the clew of thread and

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<sup>307</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 171.

<sup>308</sup> Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>309</sup> Paulette Singley, *How to Read Architecture: An Introduction to Interpreting the Built Environment* (London: Routledge, 2019), 1.

understand the structure of the labyrinth is her power as a reader. Like writer Tristan Gooley who navigates nature based on environmental clues, we act as architects and inventors when we read the clues around us and relate their presence to the whole.

This is a radically different view of language than we typically perpetuate in academia. Instead of emphasizing language that is arbitrary and conventional and based on a system of differences, this notion of language is “the emerging breath (air) that breaks the silence of the perceptual world and is capable of first giving shape to an atmosphere, disseminating another layer of significance over the world of perception.” Rather than extract meaning from the signs and use it for our purposes, we breathe with the clues. Experience teaches us that there are infinite possibilities beyond the horizon of our perception. William Blake calls divine perception our capacity to make meaning out of the infinitude before us. For Blake, perceptions based on human experience always include critical insights from the imagination. Blake forms his ideas of divine perception from Dante and believes that the divine stems from within, specifically from the human imagination. My addition to Blake is that it comes from within and without (books/nature/culture, etc.), hence the breath metaphor.

Imagination offers hope that as we sail toward the horizon, we reach a destination instead of falling off the world’s edge. So our perception shapes our atmosphere but is informed by our imagination. Like Blake, Giambattista Vico connected the notion of imagination to the divine. When we think of the primordial gesture of breath, we tend to think of how deeply personal it is. The same thought process tends to accompany most thoughts on reading. Yet there is a profoundly layered spiritual reality of breath that

emerges through stories, myths, and ancient writings that honor breath's role in creation. These teachings demonstrate how breath mediates the interactivity between a divine source and the created world, just like it mediates interactivity between humans and what we make. Both manifestations share that breath connects the interior to the exterior - the visible to the invisible.

Native American writer Linda Hogan teaches that the stars are the breath of the Great Spirit in *Lakota Astronomy*.<sup>310</sup> Interestingly, our language reveals that same reverence for celestial phenomena. In receiving the guidance of this natural phenomena, we accept a gift from the divine. Etymologically speaking, the word divine communicates that which comes from the sky, heaven, or God. This is found in the associated root *dyeu*, which means "to shine," and explains why mythology associates stars and planets with divine order. Several creation stories emphasize breath not as the origin of life but as the force that mediates it. Breathing gives form to the implicate order of the created cosmos and the minute particulars contained in the tiny vapors of each breath. In various religious traditions, the divine comes in the form of breath, and we call it spirit.

Creation, then, is not *ex nihilo* but a kind of transfiguration. This suggests that the divine breath responsible for creation is born of that very creation. Determining the meaning of that creation is the responsibility of readers who are part of the created order. If that is the case, readers must embrace the paradox that Philosophy professor Karmen MacKendrick describes as "a breath given form by matter and matter its meaning by breath."<sup>311</sup> When we consider the phenomena before us, we breathe with the energy of the

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<sup>310</sup> Linda Hogan, *The Radiant Lives of Animals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), xii.

<sup>311</sup> Karmen MacKendrick, *The Matter of Voice: Sensual Soundings* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2016), 98.

stars, and our perception is divine. The fruit of what we consider is no longer seen as a gift, let alone divine. This refusal to incorporate our lived experience into our knowledge systems is a decision that would get Theseus slaughtered by the Minotaur. Consider the word “consider.” Academic training suggests the word is soft, and a more powerful verb would communicate a more authoritative tone. The etymology of the word “consider” conveys the idea of seeing with (*con*) the stars (*sider*).<sup>312</sup> That means we breathe in the Great Spirit when we consider something. The word “consider” now carries a softer connotation, but its etymology is at the root of the word reason. The reason, as we all know, was the guiding motivation of the Enlightenment. What is odd is how our current view of reason only carries the notion of cold, hard, verifiable truth, but at the root of the word, reason is *veri*, which means consider.

Ultimately breath offers a reader divine perception to consider the phenomena before her and create order out of chaos. The reader does not impose order; she creates it with the atmosphere. Whether or not we acknowledge a creator in the religious sense is irrelevant. These traditions honor the relationship we cultivate with the environment through the personification of this life force and highlight the reader’s interdependence with the world. At the heart of this interdependence is an ethical imperative inspiring the reader to care for the phenomena before her.

At the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno*, Dante is out of breath, trying to keep up with Virgil, his guide.<sup>313</sup> His breathing sets him apart in the afterlife and even draws attention to him in the beginning pages of *Purgatorio*.<sup>314</sup> Extracting that breath from the world is

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<sup>312</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Penguin, 2016), 6.

<sup>313</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 3.

<sup>314</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio* (New York: Anchor, 2004).

the haunting image Dante the poet leaves readers to consider in the final canto of *Inferno*.<sup>315</sup> Dante thinks he sees a windmill appear on the horizon through the fog. The windmill is an invention designed to siphon and control the world's life force for material gain. A warning to Dante and readers alike, Mark Vernon heeds this warning: "As he looks, he feels gusts of wind coming from the direction of the supposed contraption. He shrinks back and seeks shelter behind Virgil. The wind is a kind of anti-breath or anti-spirit. It sucks the life out of the atmosphere rather than being an expression of vitality. The emptiness is intimidating."<sup>316</sup> When we use divine gifts for material gains, the primary motivation of the current educational system, we face this emptiness instead of life. Reading with an inclination toward life means embracing the living, moving world, and relating the parts to the whole. It is as natural as breathing and allows us to tap into the infinite possibilities given to us through tapping into our divine perception.

There is an ancient practice of reading Biblical texts called *Lectio Divina*, an approach that translates to "divine reading" or "sacred reading." While the histories and mythologies of breath remind us of how our interior is connected to our exterior, it also clarifies how we give meaning to our perception through participation. In the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, the reader sets out to touch the divine inspiration that is incarnated in the form of the written word. The reader encounters the text by bringing the phenomena into the body through reading. This approach to the text involves *lectio* - reading, *meditatio* - meditation, *oratio* - prayer, and *contemplatio* - contemplation. Readers practicing *lectio divina* identify scripture as a sacrament. They meditate on the

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<sup>315</sup> Alighieri, *The Inferno*, 627.

<sup>316</sup> Mark Vernon, *Dante's Divine Comedy: A Guide for the Spiritual Journey* (Angelico Press, 2021), 210.

text, a process that occurs in the body. Sacred reading transforms the reader, and the transformative power of *lectio divina* is powered by breath.

This orientation to reading suggests the text alone is not sacred but requires the reader's participation. What is evident is that the reader participates in the sensual world, even if the material she senses are tiny particles traveling through the air. Indian philosopher Jadunath Sinha distinguishes human perception from divine perception based on the ability to interact with the sensual qualities of our perception: "Human perception is sensuous, while divine perception is non-sensuous."<sup>317</sup> A meditation on breath teaches us that human perception is divine, and even when an experience seems immaterial, it is always sensuous. Philosopher Owen Barfield makes this argument in *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*.<sup>318</sup> He gleans this insight from the anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl who studies the way people in ancient civilizations perceive phenomena and participate in the world. In an era Barfield calls *original participation*, people are not separate from phenomena but connect to them through non-sensory links. Barfield points to the different postures toward language between early and modern civilizations; the most significant difference is that the words used to name phenomena required participation, whereas they are now considered abstract representations.<sup>319</sup> Rather than discern humans from non-human actors to attribute causal connections between phenomena, perception based on participatory logic inspires readers to recognize and appreciate the diverse sphere of influences traveling through their human experience.

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<sup>317</sup> Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Psychology Perception* (London: Routledge, 2013), 371.

<sup>318</sup> Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 40-45.

<sup>319</sup> Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 45.

When we receive input into our bodies, we are transformed. The powerful thing about breath is how it simultaneously gives us life and understanding. This is what happens when we breathe and transform the air we inhale. Air is vibrant matter. The exchange between our interior and exterior is how we make sense of the world. When we exhale, that matter returns to the world anew. This happens at the cosmological level when the divine creates the world with breath but also underlies the creation myths of human life. The relationship between spirit and breath is quite close across several cultures and includes the inner breath of a person and the atmosphere surrounding her. In each case, breath is a life force that filters our existence in the world. Breath offers possibilities for symbolic and metabolic transformations. When we think about our breath, we divide our thoughts into two: we inhale, and we exhale. This double movement is like reading: we receive input and create meaning. The body is the threshold where the interior and exterior meet.

The mediation between the visible and the invisible celebrates what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the chiasm or the intertwining in the writings published after his death titled, *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>320</sup> There is an intertwining between the perceiver and the phenomena in the perceptive interaction that leaves each changed. Michel Henry considers this in *Seeing the Invisible*, a book that focuses on the abstract art of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky. Henry echoes Kandinsky's own words when he observes how "we constantly experience the fact that every phenomenon can be lived in two ways — externally and internally — with respect to one phenomenon that never

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<sup>320</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 160.

leaves us, that is, our own body.”<sup>321</sup> Consciousness and the body are intertwined. My consciousness expands as I participate in each perceptive act. This expansion is both internal and external. The possibilities for reading are immense. Renewing our posture toward reading expand our capacity for learning, acting, and creating. Knowing, doing, and making each contribute to a meaningful life, starting in the relationship between the reader and her text.

### **Reception and Creation**

In reading, we create patterns to situate our bodily experience. These patterns might seemingly function as limitations, constricting knowledge and providing constraints, but patterns help create meaning. Lines allow us to recognize different structures. Studying patterns in nature is an excellent precursor to creative and participatory reading. When we witness patterns in nature, we find comfort in their repetition. We tend to call these repetition cycles or seasons. Naming our observations that repeat does not limit these natural phenomena. Still, it creates space for the observer to celebrate their deviations - not as separate from the phenomena but as an integral part of it. A full moon rises in the sky every 29.5 days but once a year, near what we have called the autumn equinox or named the month of September, the moon is fatter and fuller. For Gilles Deleuze, our being in the world, our habitude, is a consequence of “the thousands of passive syntheses of which we are organically composed” (Deleuze 1994: 74). Like the Harvest moon rising in September, the difference appreciates repetition. This is precisely where patterns

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<sup>321</sup> Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 5.

come from. Philip Ball observes this in his book *Patterns in Nature*. He explains that patterns come from the partial destruction of symmetry: “The more symmetry that gets broken, the more subtle and elaborate the pattern.” (Ball introduction?)

When she drinks rainwater collected in the hollow of a boulder, Brenda Hogan says she and her companions are drinking the sky off the water’s surface.

Drinking the water, I thought how the earth and sky are generous with their gifts and how good it is to receive them. Most of us are taught, somehow, about giving and accepting human gifts, but not about opening ourselves and our bodies to welcome the sun, the land, the visions of sky and dreaming, not about standing in the rain ecstatic with what is offered.<sup>322</sup>

Creation is tied to both life and the act of making. When it comes to making, Alberto Perez Gomez finds inspiration from the craftsmanship of the Haida people, an indigenous tribe originally from Haida Gwaii in the Pacific Northwest. Many scholars have admired their art and architecture but what Perez Gomez celebrates is their posture toward making. He points out that the verb for “making poetry” in their tribal language is the same as the verb “to breathe.” This is a common theme we witness again and again. Across several creative accounts, breath is often tied to creation.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep waters in the Genesis account of creation. God then spoke the rest of creation into existence, “Let there be,” and there was. God then breathes life into the nostrils of the first human. The Hebrew word for breath is *Ruach* and translates to wind, air, breath, and spirit

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<sup>322</sup> Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 43.

throughout the Bible. From Ancient Greek, we learn the *psyche*, typically translated as soul or spirit or mind, literally translates “to breathe.” The root of atmosphere, *atmos*, communicated the ideas of vapor and steam. This relates to the Hindu notion of *atman*, a word used to describe the concept of the soul.

The Hindu belief that *prana*, translated from the Sanskrit meaning “vital breath,” is the immortal life force that sustains us is one of the most potent and formative teachings in the Bhadavagita. Eknath Easwaran teaches that *prana* can also be translated as “our immense capacity to desire,” which he says is closely related to “our capacity to love.” All bodily organs depend on *prana* for nourishment, but it is also the source of desire.

The connection between love and breath is profound across cultures. The Greek philosopher Empedocles associates the breath of desire with Eros, the Greek god of love. Classicist Anne Carson describes his formulation as a world where breath is everywhere, but edges are nowhere.<sup>323</sup> Reading is often associated with passive reception, but breath, like reading, depends on participation and requires movement to communicate. Carson refers to participation as will and says the relationship between breath and the environment depends on it: “Inescapable as the environment itself, with his wings he moves love in and out of all creatures at will.”<sup>324</sup> This analogy is a gift that keeps on giving: “Wings and breath transport Eros as wings and breath convey words.”<sup>325</sup>

From Carson’s perspective, the individual is vulnerable to this process the way a lover is susceptible to the will of Eros or Cupid as the Romans called him. Relating the reader to the architect removes possibilities of passivity. The reader, like the lover, learns to

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<sup>323</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 49.

<sup>324</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 49.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

breathe with the environment instead of opposing it or appropriating it. Like Ariadne, she pursues various possible paths with care. When we read toward breath, we start with a vulnerable, open-pored posture toward phenomena. An ecological approach to reading is built on mutual reciprocity. Open to infinite possibilities, the reader's path only makes one promise: it will leave you changed.

### **Maternal Care**

The Holy Spirit is typically read as one of three masculine persons of the trinity, but the etymology of the word *Ruach* is feminine. In the case of *prana*, breath energy is considered masculine, but its force is fiercely feminine. The following Vedic scripture communicates just that: "All that exists in the three worlds rests in the control of prana. As a mother protects her children, O Prana, protect us and give us splendor and wisdom."<sup>326</sup> Whether male or female, breath is humanity's common denominator. As a person who takes a breath only to give it back to the world, again and again, we must learn to honor, protect, care for and cultivate this crucial human practice.

Daniel Coleman explores reading, spirituality, and cultural politics in his book, *In Bed With the Word*. "What is it about reading," he asks, "that is so conducive to spiritual life?"<sup>327</sup> His understanding of spirituality emphasizes relationships with ourselves, each other, and the living world we are enveloped in. These areas intersect the reading activity and how our inner experience corresponds with our outer experiences. Coleman continues,

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<sup>326</sup> Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishads* (Nilgiri Press, 2007), 2.13.

<sup>327</sup> Daniel Coleman, *In Bed with the Word: Reading, Spirituality, and Cultural Politics* (University of Alberta, 2009), 8.

This understanding of spirituality makes it not just an inner feeling or a psychic state, nor is it merely inner work or the process of interior discernment. It involves these things, but it also requires outward attentiveness to the directions and movements of the world beyond our minds and hearts. Thus, spirituality is the way we live out our relationships with our environment and with other people, as well as our secret selves.<sup>328</sup>

The act of reading is a relationship enveloped by the air characterized by correspondence. While a relational ontology celebrates the possibilities of connection and growth, this pursuit of reading always occurs between the reader and her phenomena.

We recognize our place in the world through breathing and correspondence with it. According to Luce Irigaray, this recognition enters us into “The Age of Breath.” Through breath, we realize our uniqueness and what is common to each of our traditions: “The breath exists before and beyond all representations, words, forms, all kinds of specific figurations or even idols, all sorts of rituals or dogmas, and thus allows a communication between cultures, sexes, and generations.”<sup>329</sup> Irigaray emphasizes that woman has to be conscious of her breathing and seek to cultivate this practice.<sup>330</sup> (Ibid) This sense of cultivation she advocates for carries a kind of protection. The key to understanding the feminine divine is hidden in understanding the relationship between the body that breathes and the world we inhabit. “The feminine divine,” Irigaray explains, “never separates itself from nature, but transforms it, transubstantiates it without ruining it.”<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Daniel Coleman, *In Bed With the Word*, 9

<sup>329</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings* (London: A&C Black, 2004), 146.

<sup>330</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Key Writings*, 146

<sup>331</sup> Ibid 167.

The variance in gender in each tradition opens up the possibilities for the reader, no matter one's gender, to identify with the life force of breath as a guide but to care for and protect the gift this life force gives.

This care and protection starkly contrast postures of control and stasis in earlier approaches to language. Jean Louis Chretien elaborates on the historical confusion associated with that first act of naming in *The Ark of Speech* and offers an alternate interpretation. For Chretien, naming the critters was not about ownership but guardianship. This is why Chretien sees human speech as the first ark.<sup>332</sup> Naming these creatures was an act of protection: "Their first guardian, the first safeguard, is that of speech which shelters their being and their diversity. This is true for more than just the animals. No protective gesture could take responsibility of rite least being if the latter had not been taken up into speech."<sup>333</sup> Chretien emphasizes that Adam had to first see and consider the nature of each animal before naming it.<sup>334</sup> This required a relationship. This idea of protecting the animals is radically different from the idea of owning them. That is why Chretien explains that for Maurice Blanchot, naming the animals constituted the first flood. Blanchot follows Hegel in this regard when he associates the act of naming with awarding animals autonomy. Even in our independence, we always share the air.

Luce Irigaray celebrates how two distinct phenomena can enter a relationship of love, generosity, and mutual reciprocity. This takes place in the space between the two. In earlier renderings of the reader's relationship with the text, this space between the reader and the text disappeared. It is precisely this space that invites mutual transformation.

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<sup>332</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>333</sup> Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, 2.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid* 3.

Without honoring this space, there can be no reciprocity between perceiver and phenomena. When I imagine this space, I think of a threshold. The host, or the reader, invites the traveler into their home. The host is open and hospitable and greets the text with a generous perception. I think about the Ancient Greek term *xenia* and how reading might require this radical hospitality. Anne Carson elaborates on the nature of this space between reader and phenomena, “In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible to difference. It is an erotic space.”

In developing this practice, I am looking for a model that honors the transformative potential of the space between phenomena, like a threshold that recognizes and celebrates movement. In reading, there is an intertwining between two phenomena, the perceiver and the perceived, not to become one - but to remain two while entering into a relationship open to mutual transformation. This is what is possible with the logic of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm. Every reading experience offers a robust energy exchange, yet it is rarely regarded as a mutual transformation.

Our role as creators is rooted in our status as creatures, sharing a life-world with others through relationships of all kinds. Wendell Berry fleshes out some of these ideas in one of his Port William novels, *Hannah Coulter*. In the novel, the protagonist, Hannah, gives birth to Margaret during World War II. She recognizes how her daughter’s new life exists in a season of paradox; joy and grief are written in her stars. You can hear this in the lines below:

To know that I was known by a new living being, who had not existed until she

was made in my body by my desire and brought forth into the world by my pain and strength — that changed me. My heart, which seemed to have only loss and grief in it before, now had joy also.<sup>335</sup>

This is also a radical illustration of the theological concept of kenosis. When Jesus emptied himself of his own will, he became receptive to God's will. His death on the cross, draining him of life, meant death would be conquered. In Wendell Berry's novel, there is a reversal. The parental figure is emptied by choice - a choice demonstrating the profound reciprocity in the relationship between child and parent. Hannah empties herself of milk as her infant receives it and is consequently filled with milk and love. "As she nursed and the milk came, she began a little low contented sort of singing. I would feel milk and love flowing from me to her as once it had flowed to me. It emptied me. As the baby fed, I seemed slowly to grow empty of myself, as if in the presence of that long flow of love even grief could not stand."<sup>336</sup> Following the example of Jesus's death on the cross, Hannah is not only filled with love but also life. The novel leaves me wondering whether the spiritual recognition of this kind of emptying or kenosis could exist without being preceded by profound grief. Perhaps the greatest lesson of motherhood is one of love amid life.

What if Augustine was right, though? If our capacity for knowing God does not stem from a void but from space, or what Chretien calls spacious joy, which is never empty, our role as creators orients us toward dilation instead of contraction. What if there is a way to see contraction differently? We witness constant contraction in nature, like when

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<sup>335</sup> Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter: A Novel* (Catapult, 2005), 54.

<sup>336</sup> Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 55.

the tide goes out or planets move retrograde. Even our breathing is evidence of our lungs' natural expansion and contraction. This observation about contraction has a rich history pointing to another theological concept called *tzimtum*. We are describing this precisely: God contracts himself to make room for others. The creative desire does not stem from lack, but movement. When we read, we make meaning and create narratives not because we lack meaning but because we are coparticipants in the perceptive act.

The body is a narrative horizon, and that narrative is given to us through divine perception. One of the most profound examples of this comes from the book of Job. "It is the spirit of Man, the Breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand." By emphasizing the body as the place of mediation, transformation, and ultimately, transfiguration, we recognize that through reading, we share a responsibility with the text to pursue life. Divine perception comes from within and without. We apprehend our experiences by placing them in a web of relations. These relations become the stories we tell with our voices. The relation is the story told to us that we apprehend through the senses. The more experiences we place in this web of connections, the more we feel the sense of aliveness. This starts with reading as perception, a posture intentional about receiving and creating the world.

### **Listening Voices**

Instead of *only* cognitively apprehending a text, an emphasis on breath invites the reader to comprehend her text existentially. Existence here is not strictly material, nor is it only spiritual. Spirit and body are intertwined in ways we often find challenging to

comprehend. The common denominator is the body; through breath, we recognize how spirit, mind, and however else we think of our interiority and body, including exterior experiences, are intertwined.

Breathing highlights qualities both singular and plural about our existence. We breathe to live, but we also breathe to share life. It is a natural expression of who we are. We must learn to protect and cultivate our breath in a way that honors that singularity. This need is evident in Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar* when Esther is at Joan's funeral. While anticipating the exit interview between her stay in the psychiatric ward and her reintegration into society, she celebrates her existence by acknowledging her singularity: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am."<sup>337</sup> When we attend to our breath, we are reminded of that uniqueness. What is telling about this moment in the novel is that she remembers her breath moments before being released from the institution. Before she shares the air with others, she carefully accounts for her autonomy. When we attend to our breath, we are reminded of our plurality. My body is a narrative horizon, and the plurality of voices inform each moment as they inform each word on the page.

This singularity is expressed in the repetition of the phrase, I am. In this statement, the reader detects echoes of the biblical saying that Yahweh uses to identify himself to Moses. What is even more profound than this biblical allusion is how this phrase is repeated to sound like the beating of her heart. Her breathing pumps oxygen to her heart and is the precise reason she can brag about her aliveness while Joan finds a different

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<sup>337</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 256.

fate. Being alive directly corresponds to her ability to breathe with and connect to others in society. Even though her heart is beating and she is very much alive, the *feeling* of being alive comes from listening. Chrétien calls listening a “palpitating activity” and says, “it can happen only with this heart that beats, this air breathed in and breathed out, this patient activity of the entire body.”<sup>338</sup> That means I listen with all of my body, and the act of speech is never separate from an act of the body.<sup>339</sup>

The polyphony of voices that emerge from the page begins with each word. Gaston Bachelard calls the voice a “delicate Aeolian harp that nature has set as the entrance to our breathing.”<sup>340</sup> He calls the voice a sixth sense and tenderly acknowledges how it “quivers at the merest movement of metaphor; it permits human thought to sing.”<sup>341</sup> Let us step through the door with a willingness to conduct culture.

## **Conduction**

“I had always avoided that bridge, for it was stained with the remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way. But knowing now the awesome power of memory, how it can open a blue door from one world to another, how it can move us from mountains to meadows, from green woods to fields caked in snow, knowing now that memory can fold the land like cloth, and knowing, too, how I had pushed my memory of her into the “down there” of my mind, how I forgot, but did not forget, I know now that this story, this Conduction, had to begin there on that fantastic bridge between

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<sup>338</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech* (London: Routledge, 2004), 15.

<sup>339</sup> Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, 15.

<sup>340</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (London: Penguin, 2014), 214.

<sup>341</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 214.

the land of the living and the land of the lost.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer*<sup>342</sup>

German sociologist and philosopher George Simmel offers penetrating insights into the mundanities of everyday life, challenging his readers to alter their perspective and think differently about spatial metaphors. He provides a counterintuitive reading of two architectural structures in his 1909 essay, "Bridge and Door." His creative reading of the bridge and the door open up new possibilities for readers to orient themselves in time and space:

Whereas in the correlation of separateness and unity, the bridge always allows the accent to fall on the latter and at the same time overcomes the separation of its anchor points that make them visible and measurable, the door represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act.<sup>343</sup>

Although the bridge is designed to connect two places, Simmel challenges readers to celebrate the door instead of the bridge. We tend to forget everything under the bridge we are overcoming because of the connection it inspired between two places. Without remembering the fragility of our existence and acknowledging the potential for separation, we take our togetherness for granted.

By virtue of the fact that the door forms, as it were, a linkage between the space of human beings and everything that remains outside it, it transcends the

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<sup>342</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer: A Novel* (One World, 2019), 3.

<sup>343</sup> Georg Simmel, "Bridge and Door," Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005), 65.

separation between the inner and the outer. Precisely because it can also be opened, its closure provides the feeling of a stronger isolation against everything outside this space than the mere unstructured wall. The latter is mute, but the door speaks.<sup>344</sup>

The door - a robust and erect figure reaching from floor to ceiling - reminds us that we are separate. And here's the rub: our inability to remove the boundary symbolized by the closed door reminds us how beautiful human connection is. The gifts we give to each other during this time are motivated by a desire to connect - not capitalize.

Giving is not generated from a scarcity mindset but generosity of perception. We do not share because we lack connection. We share because we are acutely aware of our togetherness even when we are apart - even when a door stands between us. This is part of the human condition that Georg Simmel bravely recognizes.

The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes by which enslaved Americans escaped bondage to relocate to the northern United States and Canada. The railroad is an apt metaphor for the transportation that took place across time and space. Each person's narrative was intimately intertwined with the black body it belonged to. In recording that narrative, abolitionists like William Still created the possibility for families to reunite once they reached the promised land. Despite changing their names and stories, meticulous records made it possible for sons to find their mothers and husbands to find their wives once they reached freedom. The history of each person's life might have been information-heavy and light on what we typically think of as narrative. Still, these very

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<sup>344</sup> Simmel, "Bridge and Door," Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture*, 65.

details point to the individual's unique existence and intrinsic value. The narrative is the meaning we assign to coordinated events.

This is a thought experiment Ta-Nehisi Coates enters into with his debut novel, *The Water Dancer* when he considers conduction as a way to relate human experience:

“Every conduction seemed activated by a memory, some whole, some mere shards.”<sup>345</sup>

Connecting those details was not about paralyzing histories but mobilizing families. That is the power of memory in the role of narrative.

The individuals who helped guide their friends, family, countrymen, and women through these lines were conductors. Harriet Tubman remains one of the most famous conductors, and her role in helping Black Americans find freedom is fictionalized in Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2019 novel, *The Water Dancer*. Coates elaborates on the conductor's role by calling the process of narration "conduction," which evokes the idea of safe passage but also communicates a transfer of heat or energy. In *The Water Dancer*, the protagonist has the gift of memory and describes himself as a boy who could remember all his yesterdays in the crispest colors with textures so rich he could drink them.<sup>346</sup> With what the reader recognizes as tragic irony, he experiences his memories with singularity except what might be his most crucial memory: the one of his mom. He remembers her dancing, but the memory is like a vapor, enveloped in the blue mist that comes to symbolize the fragile passage of memory itself. The invisibility of her face in his memories fortifies his desire to know her as well as himself. This self-knowledge for Cavarero stems from bodily experiences. When she speaks of this self-knowledge, she

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<sup>345</sup> Coates, *The Water Dancer*, 212.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid* 11.

uses *sapore*, which means *to taste*. Etymologically, *sapore* is remarkably close to *sapere*, which means *to know*. Carnal echoes are the memories that make up the intensive knowledge of first hand experience, but sometimes, we come to read and know more intensely through the act of creation.

Narrative, which is the piecing together of separate memories to offer a unified story, has the creative power to transcend time and space. It is through memories that narrative is communicated. Adriana Cavarero theorizes in *Relating Narratives* that this desire to be seen and known is a basic human impulse. It is through the sharing of these narrations that a self emerges. The unity of which is offered through dialogue. In other words, I do not decide who I am. You do not determine who I am. We decide together. That vulnerable position makes some people uncomfortable, but I am convinced that recognizing this interdependence is crucial to sharing life - to being free. Resilience, after all, does not stem from vulnerability alone but manifests when experiences are integrated into the lived experience through articulating meaning.

What few people recognize, however, is that the potential for narrative continuity made possible by the faculty of memory is also what makes enlivenment possible. Breath is not just the give and take of oxygen transforming into carbon dioxide. Through breath, we celebrate movement, and the way our existence is renewed again and again. It is an ongoing and continual balance of difference and repetition. When I embrace the singularity of my being, I am simultaneously celebrating the plurality of voices with whom I share this world. The question remains, though, whether narrative has the potential to lead to freedom, and that is precisely what Coates asks in this novel: “what if

memory had the power to transport enslaved people to freedom?"<sup>347</sup> In other words, what is the role of memory in the promise of freedom and resilience?

Langston Hughes offers insight when he calls freedom a strong seed planted in the ground. This seed is the seed of hope. Can that seed grow without knowledge of the struggle that makes up the soil in which it is planted? We know memory has a transformative power - what the French philosopher Henri Bergson calls creative evolution - to rewrite the narrative of our lives and give us new meaning. If that is the case, then what exactly does Toni Morrison mean when she says that memory's insistence allows fact to turn to fiction which turns to folklore which turns to nothing? Isn't nothing death? I don't think memory can *be* nothing if we give it meaning - this meaning is the enlivenment Andreas Weber writes about and leads to mutual transformation. We share life by connecting through our stories and remembering.

When he was a young enslaved person running errands for his master, the American Activist Frederick Douglass tricked young white boys into teaching him to read. Watching these young boys trace letter after letter in the dirt before imitating the same gesture created an appreciation for how the mental image in the mind - pictorial or linguistic - has the power to transform reality. With the same aesthetic force that fueled his activism during the abolition, he recognized change requires violence and force: "it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake."<sup>348</sup> Sarah Lewis, author of *The Rise: Creativity,*

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<sup>347</sup> Annalisa Quinn, "In 'The Water Dancer,' Ta-Nehisi Coates Creates Magical Alternate History," NPR.org, last modified September 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/26/764373265/in-the-water-dancer-memory-is-the-path-to-freedom>.

<sup>348</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?," *Ideals and Ideologies*, 2019, 380, doi:10.4324/9780429286827-61.

*The Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*, describes the way Douglass reconciles this violence and force in the realm of aesthetics through bridging the gap between sight and vision: “The key to the great mystery of life and progress,” for Douglass, “was the ability of men and women to fashion a mental or material picture and let his or her entire world, sentiments, and vision of every other living thing be affected by it. Even the most humble image held in the hand or in the mind was never silent. Like the tones of music, it could speak to the heart in a way that words could not.”<sup>349</sup> When we read, we create mental pictures with the same emancipatory power that Douglass describes.

The goal for the reader is to work at reading like a craft where the material is language, and the creation is a fresh image of thought that leaves one shaken: “The words to describe aesthetic force suggest that it leaves us changed -- stunned, dazzled, knocked out. It can quicken the pulse, make us gape, even gasp with astonishment.”<sup>350</sup> This is often where literacy narratives start because reading always leaves us changed. Reading requires participation, connection, and creation, recognizing that the reader and the book are mutually transformed by and through the aesthetic force of this convergence. Readers, like Janus, face both directions at once with an inclination toward breath and a love for life.

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<sup>349</sup> Sarah Lewis, *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 92.

<sup>350</sup> Lewis, *The Rise*, 93.

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