

Reading Time: The Act of Reading and Early Modern Time Perceptions

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Abstract

The early modern transformations of the realm of the written word also added a new dimension to the relationship between the act of reading and the experience of time. On the material culture front there is the time set for reading, affected by literacy, the availability of reading material, the lighting conditions or the supply of reading glasses, as well as by conventions that may suggest more or less appropriate occasions for this activity. In the age of the printing press, various modes and rhythms of writing and reading were also affected by the changes and by the coexistence of plural communication media. On the other hand, reading opens a window on a reality that has its own timeline – or rather, that can be experienced as belonging to another time dimension: from the remote past of Antiquity to the newly developing synchronicity that characterised the world of news. A new sensitivity for the present was being born out of a major metamorphosis in communication, transport and cultural exchange.

Keywords: News, Reading, Renaissance, Time Perception

1. *Time to Read?*

It may seem overambitious to attempt a historical anthropology of the act of reading that proposes to discuss its relationship with the experience of time, particularly as it comes from a non-specialist in many of the areas of expertise involved. I would more humbly suggest taking what follows as a thought experiment, or else as a cluster of ideas towards future research.

In choosing a title for my contribution, I deliberately sought ambiguity between the time set for the practice of reading and the time perception one may experience while reading, with the intention of exploring both (and any connection between the two). The early modern transformation of the whole business of writing, circulating written texts, and reading, also added a new dimension to the relationship between the act of reading and the perception and experience of time – on a variety of accounts.



On the practical, material culture front there is the time set for reading – this quantitative and qualitative phenomenon is affected by such variables as the extent and social distribution of literacy, the availability of reading material as expanded and modified by the advent of the printing press, the lighting conditions, the supply of reading glasses that may affect the extent to which (daily, seasonally, or in one's lifetime) willing readers may be able to satisfy their wish, as well as social conventions or medical advice that may suggest more or less appropriate occasions for this activity. Such variables inevitably interact with varying modes and rhythms of writing and reading, also affected both by the shift (or rather pluralism) of media and by the many social and cultural contexts in which all this occurs.

On the other hand, reading opens a window on a reality that has its own timeline – or rather, that can be experienced, interpreted, appropriated as belonging to one or another time dimension: from the remote past of Antiquity (as perceived by Renaissance readers with a passion for the classical world, even if this emotional revisiting allowed them to maintain a distance from it) to the newly developing synchronicity that characterised the world of news. Whether or not different readers were doing it at the same time, a new sensitivity for the present and simultaneousness was being born out of a major metamorphosis in communication, transport and cultural exchange.

1.1 *When to Read*

This is not the place to attempt to engage in matters of literacy in any systematic way, so let us merely hint at them rhapsodically. The level of literacy existing in Western societies at the end of the Middle Ages is hard to measure: as well as total estimated numbers of readers, one has to take into account inequality between men and women, between different occupations and estates, between town and country, as well as between different parts of Europe (Chartier 2002). The early modern period is regarded as a turning point, with figures progressively improving from its beginning to its end. Witnesses give us lively accounts of the situation in particular urban contexts. For instance Gregorio Leti, a seventeenth-century writer from Milan whose work regularly featured in the Index of prohibited books, wrote the following portrait of the city of Bologna:

Not only does one very frequently see tailors, cobblers, and other artisans leave their manual work, by which they earn their daily bread, to read some book of history or poetry, but even the peasants in the provinces around the city mainly talk about poetry and history, and frequently with some intelligence. (Quoted in Dooley 2002, 215)

Reading time (as well as the reading public) would appear from this description to have expanded even at the expense of working time. Similar encouraging evaluations are offered in the case of England.

Pleasure and utility (a duo of purposes of literature that we will encounter again later, in the tradition of Horace) also combined or alternated as widespread occasions and reasons for which to engage in reading:

people who did not read for pleasure read for necessity. While their relations with government were mediated more and more by printed proclamations, broadsheets, and even newspapers, their work and home lives were informed by the various trade manuals and books of secrets offering everything from cooking recipes to miracle cures. (Raven, Small and Tadmor 1996, 215)¹

The impact of the printing press on this story is undeniable. Nevertheless, Marshall McLuhan's thesis of a radical revolution as the product of the material layout of the printed page – even in its moderate reformulation by Elizabeth Eisenstein (McLuhan 1962; Eisenstein 1993) – proves less convincing in the light of the recently growing research on the multimodality of the early modern communication system. With the coexistence and interplay between oral, manuscript and printed culture, no specific 'typographic man' could easily be detected (Barbierato 2014).

A variable whose influence should never be underestimated is the religious factor: the gap between book ownership by Protestants and Catholics within the same city, seventeenth-century Metz, and among the same social groups, is striking (Benedict 1985; Chartier 2002, 127-128). It must also have involved their different uses. Time is an element of this divide, from the basic fact that the amount of time spent on reading may be regarded as a clue to individuals' religious affiliation. In sixteenth-century Venice, a silk-worker could be denounced to the Inquisition because 'he reads all the time', while a swordsmith 'stays up all night reading' (MacKenney 1987, 182; Burke 2016, 148). Needless to say, the approach to religious texts can engage individuals or groups in participating in some not entirely sensorial experience. The same goes for the magical book, which in fact does not even need to be read to sort its effects: it just needs to be there, as a material object (Chartier 2014, 20-21).

Spaces used for reading, including the reader's posture, have recently been investigated, either under some influence of a more general spatial turn or bodily turn, or due to the increased attention that material culture has gained over the past generation of study. Positions and places have been studied with reference to iconographic sources, among others, and for instance a gender divide has been suggested as marking the more traditional and rigid, sitting up straight, standard position of the male reader versus the more relaxed,

¹ Naturally, the traditional distinction of two purposes is a simplification. I mention below reading in religious context and, as one of my anonymous readers helpfully pointed out, reading for salvation and inspiration does not easily fit into either category. Nor does the reason or the mood in which a lover reads a love letter.

typically female reclining position (Plebani 2001; Chartier 2002, 134-135).² Perhaps time has so far received less attention – that is, with the exception of the major role the modes and speed of reading was given in the reference accounts of reading revolutions (to which we will briefly return).

Any consideration of historical reading practices should be careful to avoid anachronism and the risk of simply projecting into the past modes and habits of reading that may be culturally specific to our own world: from the conventions of reading individually and silently to the modern library prohibition of marking books or eating and drinking while reading. That reading aloud continued well into modern times – and we should never forget or underestimate how many people were always read to, regardless of their own level of literacy – is one of the most enduring rediscoveries of the last generation or two of the historiography of the book and of reading. Nor, when considering the act of reading before a public, should one forget the gesture that would accompany the pronunciation of a text: from the tone of voice and the use of pregnant pauses, to facial expression, posture and hand language. The message transmitted and decoded by the audience could therefore be significantly modified by adding emphasis, or a variety of possible nuances, or indeed an ironic challenge and complete reversal – and the public's reaction would be audible and visible too. As a type of performance, oratorical delivery is typically an art that unravels over time.

Silent reading is thought to have been introduced in monastic scriptoria and then adopted, from the twelfth century, in the milieu of university scholars. By the fifteenth century, it had expanded to become the predominant reading mode even among an increasing lay public. This does not mean that it had replaced reading aloud completely. Besides reading to someone else, reading to oneself while pronouncing the words has remained until modern times the practice of learners and the less able, silence being rather the marker of the most fluent in the skill (Chartier 1994; 2002). Such a divide cannot possibly exist without implications for the ways different categories of people engage in it. Being virtually inaudible – apart from potential minor sounds that depend on particular reading practices and on the text's medium, such as turning pages – silent readers can perform their activity in places and at times in which the audible sound of their voice would not be allowed (hence the obvious connection with monastic rules) or otherwise easily accepted. Thus, if visual and other sensory conditions permit, these readers can be in places where they are not easily detected, or where they do not disturb or interfere

² Since the writing and reading of this article is a reflexive act, a metadiscourse on such practices, although in historical perspective, I may as well declare that it was written by regular use of reading glasses, mostly at night time thanks to artificial light and, contrary to gender stereotypes (though perhaps these are considerably fading in postmodernity), rarely sitting at my desk.

with the activities of others. All these circumstances may prove quite relevant, for instance, if reading of prohibited material is one's objective. However, in the same way in which reading aloud not only has implications for others' ears but may affect and help the reader's own understanding of the script, reading silently is an activity that must to some extent shape one's experience of the text, by allowing deeper abstraction from the material context and conditions of the reading, and concentration on the reasoning, the narrative, or the content of the text.

In fact, Paul Saenger, to whom we owe the definitive study of the medieval introduction of the space between words and of its role as material support for silent reading, distinguishes between two forms of competence that are too often confused under the umbrella term 'literacy': phonetic literacy versus comprehension literacy. While the latter achieves understanding by the simple gaze, the former consists in decoding texts syllable by syllable by pronouncing them orally, without necessarily understanding their precise meaning. It is connected with rote memorization, and has parallels in the reciting of Christian prayers in Latin (by the faithful who are unfamiliar with the language), on the one hand, and, on the other, in the ongoing use today of Arabic as the language of prayer in Islamic countries where the everyday language is different. Not only do the two types of literacy exist side by side and in the same subjects – as is the obvious case for people who may have phonetic literacy in Latin and comprehension in the vernacular – they could also be implied within the same texts, which might for this precise reason circulate in some bilingual versions (Saenger 1989 and 1997).

As for the interaction between reading and writing, marginalia nowadays represent a dynamic area of historical enquiry, emphasising the interactive – and far from passive – role of early modern readers, who were always equipped with their writing materials. On this front, H.J. Jackson has found, at least in the English case, a shift that is datable to the eighteenth century, when annotation became simultaneously more personal and more public (2001). The *ancien régime* of marginalia saw the tradition of adding glosses, scholia and rubrics to manuscripts continuing to flourish in the age of the printed book. In the early stages of the printing press and as evidence of the hybridity characteristic of a transitional period, this apparently included some books issuing from printers' workshops already endowed with partly handwritten annotations (Saenger and Heinlen 1991). The skill of annotating while reading was taught and so some extant notes were dictated to pupils by their teachers. There were various steps in the ladder of acquiring annotating skills and, before being able to make original contributions aiming at improving the given texts, learners were simply expected to mark them with educational and mnemonic aids. In his highly influential 'De ratione studii' (1511), Erasmus recommended adopting a variety of marks, easily distinguishable from one another in order to be retrievable based on their typology. Progressively, the

press moved to provide the reader with all sorts of ready-made annotations, and no fewer than fifteen different functions of printed marginalia have been identified within English Renaissance books (Slights 1989). That some practices of reading are accompanied by the erasing, rather than the highlighting or annotating, of a text is testified typically (although not solely) by the Inquisition's expurgating instructions.

At the crossroads between spaces and times for reading, we find the material characteristics of the supports of texts, as is evident from the portability of some books and papers. The fact that they can be carried around facilitates reading elsewhere (than where reading material is ordinarily kept) and at a time of one's choice and encourages forms of privatization of the act of reading (as well as the contrary, as when a book is brought before an audience). A variety of specific, deliberately portable types of reading material have been introduced at given points in history and have significantly affected the experience of their worlds, whether literary or religious. Two clear examples are the late medieval book of hours and Aldo Manuzio's classics in octavo (Saenger 1989; Richardson 1999). The typology of *libri da bisaccia* and *libretti da mano* explored by Armando Petrucci – a testimony to the practice of reading while travelling – provide another indication of the time, as well as the conditions, of the experience (Petrucci 1969; Chartier 2002, 136-137).

Other spatial information indirectly alluding to particular times is offered by household inventories that indicate the rooms in which books were kept. Their presence in bedrooms is a direct pointer to bedtime reading – a practice that we know from egodocuments was not necessarily a solitary one, but could feature partners reading aloud to one another, or assistants reading to their employers (Chartier 2002, 132-133, 137).

Reading alone or in company may have had implications on the genre and mode of execution. Of late medieval England, we learn that 'of the various ways of reading, that which would seem most dependent on isolation is meditative devotional reading, a specialised mode of apprehension involving the ability to dwell in sustained reverie on a text. This is reading in slow time, reading as a form of prayer' (Taylor 1996, 43).

1.2 *Reading as Physical Exercise*

My earlier reference to medical discourse may have sounded slightly surprising as, from a modern viewpoint, it is not immediately obvious how reading could affect or relate to health. The discussion of this point can be helpfully introduced by a quick look at the founding text in the Western tradition of writing health advice, the Hippocratic *Regimen* (tentatively datable to the first half of the 4th century BCE). It distinguished natural from violent exercises: sight, hearing, the voice and thought are presented as the properly speaking natural. This labelling depends on a distinction between what is spontaneous for humans and what instead requires an effort. All four are regarded as

movements of the soul; however, they do affect the body, considering that in order to perform them the soul moves and heats, thus consuming part of the body's humidity (Ippocrate 1976, 543-544; Jouanna 1999, 167).

We find a developed paragraph on reading as exercise within the sixteenth-century founding oeuvre of medical gymnastics, the well-known book by Girolamo Mercuriale, first published in 1569. As largely a work of medical antiquarianism, it also details the sources, ancient and medieval, which had most significantly intervened on the matter previously. In a chapter of his sixth and last book, the Italian physician discusses 'The qualities of reading, speaking, laughing and crying'. At the opening, we find a distinction: 'I have found two types of reading mentioned in medical authors, intense and fast as opposed to relaxed'. Expanding on this typology, the author evokes a cluster of classical sources defining and medically assessing the given practice:

Intense reading – what Cornelius Celsus called 'reading aloud' – moves the breath in a way that is neither soft nor superficial, as Plutarch says, but rising up from its point of origin, as it were, in the inner parts of the body, it increases the warmth, makes the blood thin, purges all veins, opens all arteries, does not allow the humours to become thick or dense, or to become stuck in the cavities responsible for the reception and digestion of food; that is why Celsus placed it first among the exercises which can be performed at one's convenience. (Mercuriale 2008, 641)

It should be clear from the context that the distinction does not coincide with intensive versus extensive reading as defined by modern critics, nor does the occurrence of the specification 'aloud' oppose it to silent: it rather appears as a differentiation of modes of reading, more versus less energetic, however always audible. Its prescription can be either preventive or curative:

Seneca and Caelius Aurelianus confirm that it is not detrimental to the head, but rather beneficial, and Caelius recommends a similar type of reading to cure headache and insanity, while Seneca used it frequently to prevent a flux from the head. (641)

Here a further distinction is made wherein the reading matter becomes relevant, with respect to a specific category of patient:

In this case, one has to be cautious not to give anything difficult to understand to someone suffering from insanity or headache, for such subject matter, as Caelius says, has a similar effect to being transported inappropriately. (641)

Further recommendations include:

Reading aloud also helps the inner parts of the chest and the stomach, and corrects their faults, as Celsus says, since thick residues are made thin and easy to pass, and the innate heat is stimulated and increased, but not excessively. (641-643)

After a few more examples and specifications, a citation from the medieval tradition intervenes by pointing the attention to degrees of effort in reading, with a particular recommendation:

Avicenna says that one should start reading with a soft voice, then proceed to the normal level, then loudly, a crescendo and a deep breath and a moderate duration, because then it is most beneficial. (643)

Having dealt with intense and vigorous reading, Mercuriale proceeds to comment more cursorily on the other form:

Moreover, reading practiced rather gently and without strain is useful for the same purpose, except that its effects are less marked, and therefore we can use it safely after a meal, as was recommended by Plutarch. (643)

Here we encounter the first explicit reference to *when*. The indication that gentle reading is safe after a meal casts doubt, retrospectively, on whether intense reading may be similarly so. Humoral medicine was seriously concerned with digestion and the most common time recommendation on the matter of physical exercise was to avoid it immediately after meals. At this point, we discover, however, that a natural inclination to sleepiness after a meal is the terrain of a divide between two groups. If Caelius' concern for the comparative difficulty of texts referred to a particular category of sufferers, the next distinction evoked is mostly cultural:

That was also what Aristotle was talking about when he wrote that ignorant and melancholic people are sent to sleep when they start to read, because they are unable to focus their understanding, and this triggers thick and cold fumes that make the brain sleepy. Intelligent men, however, rarely fall asleep when they read, because the inner heat is increased when they activate their intellect, and hence they tend to be more alert than sleepy. (643)

Once Mercuriale has finished with the subject of reading, he goes on to speaking or talking, 'which in itself is again a type of vocal exercise, but it is inferior to the aforementioned types [i.e., vociferation and singing, as well as reading] in vehemence and strength, and for this reason it is a weak type of exercise' (643).

A few years after Mercuriale, the distinction between 'loude and soft reading', examined among the forms of exercise for the voice, is also found in a chapter dedicated to reading within the educational treatise of the Elizabethan schoolmaster Richard Mulcaster, who relies on the same set of traditional sources (1994, chap. 12). At about the same time, however, the literature on hygiene began to enfranchise itself from slavery to ancient models and examples, and to say slightly more on current social and medical practice.

In a treatise published both in Latin and in Italian, Rodrigo da Fonseca, a Portuguese professor of medicine at Pisa and Padua for nearly half a century between the 1570s and the 1620s and a prolific writer, among others, returned to the matter of reading aloud as an example of exercise of a part of the body. His observations and distinctions enable us to eavesdrop a little more on reading practices and their contemporary conceptualization. He introduces the subject of the voice as affecting the head and the chest. He adds that when reading is performed loudly and uninterruptedly, as in a sermon, it may be seriously detrimental, particularly for subjects with feeble chests and lungs. However, a clear and moderate voice warms the chest and helps digestion. Reading aloud for an audience (*‘il legger pubblicamente’*) harms those who speak loudly and continuously; in particular, if someone is feeble in their chest, and does it for a whole hour. Here an example is given that quite possibly specifies the context of Plutarch’s recommendation, cited above by Mercuriale: it is particularly detrimental for those who read publicly after dinner (*‘che doppo desinare pubblicamente leggono’*) – a suggestion of a form of literary entertainment. Conversely, the practice that is beneficial is reading aloud with pauses, as performed by those who dictate a text to scribes (Fonseca 1603, 27).

The contemporary medical discourse was also developing an initial interest in occupational diseases, which found its first systematization in Bernardino Ramazzini’s *Diseases of Workers* (*De morbis artificum diatriba*), first published in 1700 and later enlarged. Here the Italian physician summarised, among other things, an older tradition of writing on the health issues of the *litterati* which predictably included their professional dedication to reading as one of their key lifestyle factors. A general recommendation is towards moderation, and a classic concern is to avoid an overly sedentary life (though Ramazzini suggests that those who think they can avoid its harms by extensive reading while standing, do themselves worse harm). As well as commenting on posture and sites, the chapter develops the recommendation of the appropriate time of the day for study. On the authority of Marsilio Ficino, the author suggests that ‘the morning is the best, not so the night, and even less so just after dinner’. The Renaissance philosopher thus intended to correct a frequent mistake on the part of learned men, and proved his point on various grounds, from the astrological and the humoral to the general order of the universe: ‘the day is intended for work and the night for rest, which means that scholars who study by candlelight are going against these natural laws’ (2012, 225-236, 234). Ramazzini continues:

Nevertheless, some scholars prefer to study at night rather than during the day, because the most secret recesses and friendly silence of the night are a greater aid to study ... When scholars do carry out nocturnal studies, they should not do so in cramped rooms or studies, but rather in spacious quarters, as long as they are well wrapped-up, in winter in particular, so they are not bothered by the cold. (235)

The last point, however, goes beyond the question of choosing the appropriate time, by addressing that of space and a healthy environment.

1.3 *Reading Aids*

A significant role in the extension of reading opportunities was afforded by the invention and widespread adoption of eyeglasses. Earlier societies were well aware of such phenomena as the magnifying property of some stones. Nevertheless, the late Middle Ages witnessed successful efforts to improve optical accuracy. As for many technical and other novelties, primacy is contested. By the last quarter of the thirteenth century, we find references to them in Pisa and in Venice, and early in the fourteenth century a Dominican friar preaching in Florence – who appears to be personally acquainted with an inventor and early manufacturer – referred to them by introducing the word *occhiali*. As well as to much else, the story testifies to the influence of commercial and military power over the turn of events: Venetian glassmakers were able to produce better quality glass than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, including Italy, thanks to the monopoly Venice held on trade with quality salt mines in Egypt; and while glass was made north of the Alps by using potash, the Venetians could produce crystal by using sodium. The earlier technique involved the blowing of glass balls, subsequently broken into pieces. From the mid-fifteenth century, glassmakers in Nuremberg and Regensburg, among other places, began to make lenses by using moulds. If one sits and reads, an eyeglass can be held against one's nose. Frames of various materials were soon introduced, however: from bone and wood to leather, horn and rolled copper wire. The key advantage of the most commonly produced, convex type of lenses was to facilitate reading and writing for the long-sighted, a very common condition from about the age of forty (Ilardi 2007; Willach 2008). This development has also been connected to the characteristics of the highly abbreviated, cursive script (*mercantesca*) which merchants and artisans used in their account books and correspondence and to their consequent need for optical aids (Ilardi 2007, 48). The innovation that caused a surge in the demand and supply of spectacles was, understandably, the introduction of the printing press. A product that until the mid-fifteenth century may have remained within a niche market was soon required in much larger quantities to respond to the enhanced availability of reading material, to the advance of literacy and to the expansion of the reading public. Different centres specialised in producing either cheaper or better quality eyeglasses to serve the requirements and purchasing power of different social groups.

Incidentally, one should never lose sight, so to speak, of the important role played by optics in natural philosophy, from the age of Roger Bacon to that of Galileo, nor of its implications for the construction of the pictorial

space and viewpoint in the epoch of the introduction of linear perspective and of the seeming adoption of such instruments as the camera obscura. All this has lately provided crucial matter for visual and sensory studies.

Lighting conditions form another highly relevant factor in the material culture of reading. Both the daily and seasonal alternation between light and darkness, with their connection with latitude and interaction with the varying atmospheric circumstances, affect the opportunity to look at a written text by creating more or less favourable conditions. To these material conditions one should add cultural conventions that may encourage or discourage given activities by associating them with varying degrees of social respectability according to the time and light conditions in which they are performed. Such cultural context is a historical variable and Craig Koslofsky, for instance, has spoken of an early modern European 'nocturnalization', that is, a process of 'expansion of the legitimate social and symbolic uses of the night' (2011, 2).

Anyone who has tried to read by candlelight during power cuts is familiar with the irksomeness of flickering light (a catchy title that has been given to books concerning not only candlelight but also neon). The technology of artificial light hardly changed for millennia, mostly relying on candles, torches, lamps and lanterns – with variation mainly occurring in matter of accessories (O'Dea 1958; Thwing 1959; Brox 2012). Domestic lighting was also strictly linked to the control of warmth, a fire traditionally working as the main source for both. Therefore, we ultimately owe significant improvement in lighting conditions to a general development in living conditions, one not quick to come in modern times, rather than to a specific technological advance in the field, which was not available before the nineteenth century (Roche 2000, 106-123).³

However, late medieval improvements had already taken that route, and established conditions which, at least for the English case, have been interpreted as making a difference:

The chamber, a realm of private solace in which dreaming and reading intermingle, is both a symbol and a material condition of a certain kind of leisure reading we now take very much for granted ... The threefold combination of fireplace, flue and chimney stack, a technological innovation necessary for the comfortable heating of small rooms, was in use by the early twelfth century and became increasingly common in the thirteenth and fourteenth. In these warm and well-lit chambers one could read in bed, read and eat or drink, read oneself asleep, read and fantasize.

³ Roche also offers a comparatively rare and insightful passing reference to the implications of light for reading, and its social context: 'Ability to control lighting techniques created a greater possibility for organizing specialised and separate ways of life. It allowed for greater mobility, a different style of privacy, other forms of leisure and sociability, for reading (whether shared or not), for conversation, while inability to control these techniques contributed to confusion between public and private space' (2000, 115).

Retreating from the public *praelectio* of the hall, one could read to oneself in peace and quiet; one could read silently. (Taylor 1996, 42-43)

Eventually, the nineteenth-century revolution came with ‘the invention of gaslight, followed at the end of the century by that of electric light. Installed on city streets and within buildings and homes, gaslight blurred the age-old sensory divide between the visibility of daytime and the tactility of nighttime’ (Classen 2014, 8).

Both magnifying the script and improving light conditions can be considered from the perspective of the empowerment of the senses, a category that has gained currency in recent trends in sensory history. On the whole, the relation such developments entertain with the time dimension is one of expansion and differentiation of the conditions in which readers came to have the opportunity to satisfy their wishes.

2. *Time while Reading*

As I said at the beginning, the flip side of the relationship between time and reading, besides the actual time in which reading occurs, is the reader’s own time perception. By reading we can experience our own time but also be projected backwards into a personal or shared past (it may prompt our own memory and recollection of people, situations and events) or forwards into an imagined future.

Here the anthropology of reading practices meets the poetics and rhetoric of the texts, their forms of emplotment and narrative strategies: depending on the intensity of their experience, readers may be transported away from their own space, time, and other aspects of their ordinary perception and experience, into some kind of imaginary ‘elsewhere’, into some other time, or indeed into being *someone* or *something* else. Here it is not so much the visibility of the reading that generates the effect, since listening to texts being read, recited, or sung aloud may have the same effect or be even more likely to succeed in transporting the audience. We only need to recall Eric Havelock’s suggestion of the pre-Platonic experience of the oral transmission of Greek epic to imagine similar processes of identification with a narrative context and its agents (1963).

My suggestion that the quality of such a temporal (and/or spatial or identity) transportation or transformation of the reader may depend on the intensity of the activity calls into question the historiography of the modes of reading. This has been dominated by Rolf Engelsing’s distinction between intensive versus extensive reading: the former is characterised by insistent rumination on a limited number of texts (including, typically, the Bible), often also read to others, to the extent that they could be virtually learnt by heart, while the latter exhibits a craving for a large number of books, often read in solitude and not necessarily entirely nor repeatedly – with a

reading revolution jumping from one to the other in the eighteenth century (Engelsing 1974). One of the attractions of the model for our purpose here is to hint at the diversity in the speed of reading in different cultural contexts. However, as with all models, it is obviously a simplification, and different modes of reading are likely to have always been practised, including by the same readers.

Renaissance rules, expectations, or phantasies as to how reading was or should have been performed can be gathered from a variety of contemporary sources, ranging from textbooks teaching pupils how to read to sophisticated pieces of literary criticism discussing matters of textual interpretation. The anthropology of reading practices – and this has an obvious relevance for any attempt at a historical anthropology, and in fact it explicitly inspired research in the cultural history of such practices – owes much to the original insights offered by Michel de Certeau, which are commonly summarised under his alluring comparison of reading to some kind of poaching. While acknowledging the role of social institutions trying to determine the correct meaning of texts as an unquestionable orthodoxy, Certeau incorporates the results of the literary criticism inspired by an attention to reader response to suggest that reading practices have never excluded freedom and transgression; in fact, the liberation from the need to pronounce the text offers the body a special freedom which Certeau repeatedly describes with the metaphor of the dance – once to suggest the movement of the eyes upon the page and another time as the interpretative relationship between readers and texts. He has also reminded us how the learning of reading skills does not take place in a vacuum: it is preceded by oral communication which defines the strategies in the deciphering of texts (1988, 165-176).⁴

Our modern theory of reader response clearly engages in dialectic contrast with a classical emphasis on the dominance of the author's intentions. Renaissance literary criticism depended heavily on the Horatian combination of *dulce et utile* as the purposes of poetry; it had also just discovered Aristotle's *Poetics* and began to wonder about the exact dynamics of tragic *catharsis*. Nevertheless, it has been argued that obtaining all these effects required an ability to move the audience, a task well-known to the rhetorical tradition, and via this route an awareness of the reader's role as other than passive and receptive took its first steps (Cronk 1999).

If for a fuller appreciation of the sensorial dimension of the historical act of reading one should never isolate the visual experience from a variety of vocal forms, in the latter case we do not only find reading from the standpoint of varying degrees of competence, from the stammering of syllables to the fluent reciting before an audience: we also find music. Individual or choral

⁴ In passing, Certeau suggests considering 'all sort of "reading rooms" (including lavatories)' (1988, 175) – surely a place and time for reading with its own peculiarities.

singing is a way of performing a script with tremendous resonances in the time experience (of singers and listeners alike), considering how music has by definition a temporal dimension, and rhythm may strongly affect people's lives. Jean-Claude Schmitt is currently exploring rhythms as wide underlying anthropological structures of medieval society, in the form of periodicities and fluxes permeating language and prayer, gesture and images (Formarier and Schmitt 2014; Schmitt 2016).

2.1 *Narrative Time*

To some extent, the form of a text – a complex of details that may to some degree at least have been deliberately chosen by an author to sort a particular effect – directs the reader's time experience of potentially time travelling, experiencing acceleration and deceleration, up to the limit of a suspension of the running of time.

In the second of the *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, which Italo Calvino was not able to deliver at Harvard, 'Quickness', the Italian writer praised the economy of details characteristic of some storytelling, including folktales and fairy tales (1988, 31-54). He did not mean to value quickness in itself: 'a story is an operation carried out on the length of time involved, an enchantment that acts on the passing of time, either contracting or dilating it' (35). In one example, a novella from the *Decameron* (VI.1) devoted to the art of storytelling, 'the novella is a horse, a means of transport with its own pace, a trot or a gallop according to the distance and the ground it has to travel over; but the speed Boccaccio is talking about is a mental speed' (39). The metaphor of the horse for the speed of thought also occurred in Galileo, punning in *Il Saggiatore* on the similarity between 'il decorrere' and 'il correre' (42-43).

As for the opposite value, 'the pleasures of lingering', Calvino explored such slowing techniques as repetition and digression:

In practical life, time is a form of wealth with which we are stingy. In literature, time is a form of wealth to be spent at leisure and with detachment. We do not have to be first past a predetermined finishing line. On the contrary, saving time is a good thing because the more time we save, the more we can afford to lose. Quickness of time and thought means above all agility, mobility, and ease, all qualities that go with writing where it is natural to digress, to jump from one subject to another, to lose the thread a hundred times and find it again after a hundred more twists and turns. (46)

In the course of the twentieth century, our awareness of the complex relationship between time and historical narrative has benefited, on the one hand, from the subtle phenomenological comparative examination of time in historiographical and fictional narrative conducted by Paul Ricoeur; on the

other, from the metahistorical perspective inaugurated by Hayden White. As a result, narrativity has turned into a line of enquiry of its own. It is not a novelty in the Western tradition, though, and *Temps et récit* is anchored in an analysis of Aristotle's view of the matter (White 1973; Ricoeur 1983-1985).

2.2 *Time Reborn: A New Sense of the Past?*

What perception may have developed within such a context as Renaissance humanism, with its peculiar passion for everything ancient, has been the subject of a line of historiographical reflection, under the label of a 'Renaissance sense of the past'. This was the title of an early book by cultural historian Peter Burke; it was also a topic he chose to return to with subsequent essays published over the space of more than thirty years, responding to critics and adjusting his own assessment of the matter as time went by. In its original formulation, it suggested that the humanists' love for antiquity did not impede distancing; in fact, with the attention for detail, it helped develop a more acute ability to perceive change, thus resulting in the emergence – first in Italy, later also elsewhere – of a new sensitivity for anachronism (as testified, for instance, by the attempt to adopt period dress in historical painting as well as on stage). To this point Burke added the humanists' critical attitude to documents and their interest in problems of explanation (1968; 1969). One can imagine that all this had an impact on the way humanists read, and how they experienced time while reading.

Returning to the subject on subsequent occasions, the British historian further developed the idea of a Renaissance sense of cultural distance from the past, which presented two obviously distinguished modes – that is, a 'nostalgic distance' from Antiquity versus an 'ironic distance' from the Middle Ages. Reference to such a sense as a time perspective has the advantage of rekindling the connection established many years ago by Erwin Panofsky between the Renaissance perception of the past and the invention of linear perspective (1930). The new qualifications Burke added to this historiographical reconstruction comprised, among others:

- a more explicit socio-cultural definition of the specific group which developed such an attitude;
- the recognition of a widespread tension between the sense of distance and the desire to annul it by reviving the admired past;
- and the suggestion that in this respect the Renaissance differed from other periods at both ends only by degrees. The Middle Ages witnessed cultural orientations towards the perception of that distance, except that an assumption of continuity still prevailed. By the late eighteenth century, the new sense had become much more common than before – the French Revolution marking a watershed even on this front (Burke 1994; 2001).

2.3 *Sensing the Present, in Good Company*

As a particular type of oral and written communication, news – a characteristic genre in reading practices – has played a fundamental role in the historical metamorphoses of the perception of time, by helping to develop a sense of contemporaneity (Infelise 2002; Dooley 2010a; Pettegree 2014). The fact that it is a type of information, circulating by diverse media, which did not encourage the solitary experience of newspaper reading typical of our own time, but rather a shared and often primarily aural activity, may help to correct a potential fallacy arising from our own standpoint and appreciate the multi-sensorial nature of early modern communication (pace McLuhan). One of the key specialists in this area, Brendan Dooley, defines contemporaneity in this context as

the perception, shared by a number of human beings, of experiencing a particular event at more or less the same time. It is not simply a crowd phenomenon, since the observers in question may be out of sight or earshot of one another and still imagine themselves as a group. Depending on the scale of the event and the size of the group, it may have important consequences from a social, cultural and political standpoint. At the very least, it may add to a notion of participating in a shared present, of existing in a length of time called ‘now’. Distributed over a certain geographical space or spaces, it may contribute to individuals’ sense of community, or their identification with one another. With good reason, anthropologists and historians have identified it as a hallmark of modernity. (2010b, xiii)

A development of this sort was identified by Benedict Anderson, implicitly on McLuhan’s tail, as central to the formation, in the Age of Enlightenment, of ‘imagined communities’ that led to the emergence of nation states (Anderson 2006).⁵ Nevertheless, it can be traced further back than the eighteenth century. For the English case, where the Civil War had a dramatic impact on this sphere, and conversely was influenced in its course of events by the dynamics of contemporary communication,

over the course of the seventeenth century, the news had also generated an extended present of duration, not instant. Or, to put it another way, it had carved out a ‘detemporalized zone’ between past and future, a zone that offered a space for the discussion of current events. (Woolf 2001, 108)

Daniel Woolf, whose remarks I have just quoted, concludes his analysis of news and the construction of the present in early modern England with significant implications for the conception and practice of history:

By focusing public attention on the present, and on the hinge whereby present became past, the news also occasioned interest in the converse: how the past

⁵ Cf. McLuhan 1962 and, for the suggestion of Anderson’s dependence, Rath 2014, 216.

evolved into or ‘caused’ the present ... One further by-product of this attention to the contemporary was the restructuring of temporal connections between past and present. In medieval and humanist historical thought, these had been founded on similarity, comparison and metaphor rather than, as in the modern historical tradition, proximity, continuity, and metonymy. (108)

Moreover, the circulation of news is another area for which we should bear in mind the combination of the visible and the aural, which characterised the advertisement of written *avvisi*, in shops as in public squares, with an apotheosis in the charlatan’s performance (De Vivo 2007; Barbierato 2012; Welch 2014, 75-78). Thus, we should infer that both the personal and shared act of reading and the aural experience of listening to the announcement of news must have significantly affected the way events and their contexts were positioned on a timeline.

Having said something about the sense of the past and of the present, one would naturally feel inclined to comment on how the future may have been expected and imagined. Astrology and prophecy still played a significant part in Renaissance and early modern time perceptions, with peaks at particular times of crisis or high expectations, and consequent conflicts between dominant institutions and orthodoxies and fringe experiences. Such phenomena could even cross religious and cultural barriers, and a millenarian conjuncture connected to the Islamic calendar has been identified as sweeping across Asia and the Mediterranean during the sixteenth century (Subrahmanyam 2001). We tend to connect the notion of utopia to the imagination of temporal other worlds, but in fact the original conception, as is obvious from etymology, is spatial, and a ‘temporalization of utopia’ has been dated by Reinhart Koselleck at the second half of the eighteenth century (2002, 84-99). The German scholar ascribes the advent of modernity in time perception, with acceleration towards an unknown future to the same period (1985). One should expect this new attitude to have also affected the specific time perception of a reader (of utopian literature, as well as of other fiction or type of writing). The attention for such developments has recently required the coinage of the expression ‘regimes of historicity’, to identify culturally posited time conceptions (Hartog 2015). In addition to this awareness, we must not forget that, if the past is a foreign country, we should exercise on our relationship to it the same cautious critique which Johannes Fabian proposed some time ago for the construction of the object in anthropology (2002). Scholars have begun to emphasise the need to go beyond teleological history and to assess the implications for global history (Hunt 2008).

An emphasis on some Western monopoly of the linear conception of time, as well as of its mechanical calculation, was convincingly deconstructed as a myth fifty years ago by Joseph Needham’s analysis of the Chinese experience (1988).⁶ Nevertheless, the cultural specificity of time perception can be taken for

⁶ For the case of the Ottoman Empire, see Georgeon and Hitzel 2012.

granted and, with curiosities inevitably encouraged by the social processes of our own time, one may legitimately wonder what happened with travel and cultural encounters: when individuals and groups, for whatever reason, migrated to an environment characterised by time frames different from their own, including calendars and accepted chronologies, how did they tend to negotiate between the systems? And how did entire societies do so when coming into new or more intense contact with one another? However intriguing, this perspective would form the subject of a different study, and we will have to leave it there.

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