A

HISTORY

of

READING

ALBERTO

MANGUEL

TO CRAIG STEPHENSON,

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
My head so much concerned with outer
Yours with inner weather.

— After Robert Frost —

PENGUIN BOOKS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014

USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China
penguin.com
A Penguin Random House Company

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins Publishers 1996
First published in the United States of America by Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc., 1996
Published in Penguin Books 1997
This edition with a new introduction published 2014

Illustration credits appear on pages 357–59.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE HARDCOVER EDITION AS FOLLOWS:
Manguel, Alberto.
A history of reading / Alberto Manguel.
p. cm.
eBook ISBN 978-0-698-17897-7
1. Books and reading—History. I. Title.
Z1003.M292 1996
028'.9—dc20 96-2703

Version_2

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INTRODUCTION

The fate of every book is mysterious, especially to its author. After the first publication of *A History of Reading* in 1996, I was astonished to discover a worldwide community of readers who, individually and under circumstances very different from my own, had undertaken the same adventures and shared with me identical rituals of initiation, epiphanies and persecutions, as well as the intuition that book and world are reflections of each other.

Reading has always been for me a sort of practical cartography. Like other readers, I have an absolute trust in the capability that reading has to map my world. I know that on a page somewhere on my shelves, staring down at me now, is the question I'm struggling with today, put into words long ago, perhaps, by someone who could not have known of my existence. The relationship between a reader and a book is one that eliminates the barriers of time and space and allows for what Francisco de Quevedo, in the sixteenth century, called "conversations with the dead". In those conversations I'm revealed. They shape me and lend me a certain magical power.

Only a few centuries after the invention of writing, some six thousand years ago, in a forgotten corner of Mesopotamia (as the following pages will tell), the few who possessed the ability to decipher written words were known as scribes, not as readers. Perhaps the reason for this was to lend less emphasis to the greatest of their gifts: having access to the archives of human memory and rescuing from the past the voice of our experience. Since those distant beginnings, the power of readers has produced in their societies all manner of fears: for having the craft of bringing back to life a message from the past, for creating secret spaces which no one else can enter while the reading takes place, for being able to redefine the universe and rebel against unfairness, all by means of a certain page. Of these miracles we are capable, we the readers, and these may perhaps help rescue us from the abjection and stupidity to which we seem so often condemned.

And yet, banality is tempting. To dissuade us from reading, we invent strategies of distraction that transform us into bulimic consumers for whom novelty and not memory is essential. We reward triviality and monetary ambition while stripping the intellectual act of its prestige, we replace ethical and aesthetic notions with purely financial values and we

propose entertainments that offer immediate gratification and the illusion of universal chatting instead of the pleasurable challenge and amiable slow pace of reading. We oppose the printing press to the electronic screen, and we substitute libraries of paper, rooted in time and space, with almost infinite webs whose most notorious qualities are instantaneity and immoderation.

Such oppositions are not new. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, in Paris, high up in the tall bell towers where Quasimodo hides, in a monk's cell that serves both as study and alchemist's laboratory, the archdeacon Claude Frollo stretches one hand towards the printed volume on his desk, and with the other points towards the Gothic contours of Notre Dame which he can see below him, through his window. "This," says the unhappy clergyman, "will kill that." According to Frollo, a contemporary of Gutenberg, the printed book will destroy the book-edifice; the printing press will put an end to the literate medieval architecture in which every column, every architrave, every portal is a text that can and must be read.

Then, as today, this prophecy was of course a false one. Five centuries later, and *thanks* to the printed book, we have access to the knowledge of the medieval architects, commented on by Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin, and re-imagined by Le Corbusier and Frank Gehry. Frollo fears that the new technology will annihilate the preceding one; he forgets that our creative capacities are prodigious and that we can always find use for yet another instrument. We don't lack ambition.

Those who set up oppositions between the electronic technology and that of the printing press perpetuate Frollo's fallacy. They want us to believe that the book — an instrument as perfect as the wheel or the knife, capable of holding memory and experience, an instrument that is truly interactive, allowing us to begin and end a text wherever we choose, to annotate in the margins, to give its reading a rhythm at will — should be discarded in favour of a newer tool. Such intransigent choices result in technocratic extremism. In an intelligent world, electronic devices and printed books share the space of our work desks and offer each of us different qualities and reading possibilities. Context, whether intellectual or material, matters, as most readers know.

Sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era, there appeared a curious text purporting to be a biography of Adam and Eve. Readers have always liked to imagine a prehistory or a sequel to their favourite stories, and the stories of the Bible are no exception. Taking as its starting-point the few pages of the Book of Genesis that refer to our legendary ancestors, an anonymous scribe composed a *Life of Adam and Eve* recounting their adventures and (mostly) misadventures after the banishment from Eden. At the end of the book, in one of those post-modernist twists so common in our earliest literatures, Eve asks her son Seth to write down a true account of his parents' lives: the book the

reader holds in his hands is that account. What Eve says to Seth is this: “But listen to me, my children! Make tablets of stone and others of clay, and write on them, all my life and your father’s and all that you have heard and seen from us. If by water the Lord judge our race, the tablets of clay will be dissolved and the tablets of stone will remain; but if by fire, the tablets of stone will be broken up and the tablets of clay will be baked [hard].” Eve wisely does not choose between tablets of stone and tablets of clay: the text may be the same, but each substance lends it a different quality, and she wants both.

Almost twenty years have elapsed since I finished (or abandoned) *A History of Reading*. At the time, I thought I was exploring the act of reading, the perceived characteristics of the craft and how these came into being. I didn’t know I was in fact affirming our right as readers to pursue our vocation (or passion) beyond economic, political and technological concerns, in a boundless, imaginative realm where the reader is not forced to choose and, like Eve, can have it all. Literature is not dogma: it offers questions, not conclusive answers. Libraries are essentially places of intellectual freedom: any constraints imposed upon them are our own. Reading is, or can be, the open-ended means by which we come to know a little more about the world and about ourselves, not through opposition but through recognition of words addressed to us individually, far away, and long ago. I would feel satisfied if my *History of Reading* were read as the grateful confession of a passionate reader, anxious to share with others this ongoing, painstaking happiness.

— Alberto Manguel, New Year’s Day, 2014

A universal fellowship of readers. *From left to right, top to bottom:* the young Aristotle by Charles Degeorge, Virgil by Ludger tom Ring the Elder, Saint Dominic by Fra Angelico, Paolo and Francesca by Anselm Feuerbach, two Islamic students by an anonymous illustrator, the Child Jesus lecturing in the Temple by disciples of Martin Schongauer, the tomb of Valentine Balbiani by Germain Pilon, Saint Jerome by a follower of Giovanni Bellini, Erasmus in his study by an unknown engraver.

THE LAST

PAGE

Read in order to live.
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT
Letter to Mlle de Chantepie, June 1857









THE LAST PAGE

One hand limp by his side, the other to his brow, the young Aristotle languidly reads a scroll unfurled on his lap, sitting on a cushioned chair with his feet comfortably crossed. Holding a pair of clip glasses over his bony nose, a turbaned and bearded Virgil turns the pages of a rubricated volume in a portrait painted fifteen centuries after the poet's death. Resting on a wide step, his right hand gently holding his chin, Saint Dominic is absorbed in the book he holds unclasped on his knees, deaf to the world. Two lovers, Paolo and Francesca, are huddled under a tree, reading a line of verse that will lead them to their doom: Paolo, like Saint Dominic, is touching his chin with his hand; Francesca is holding the book open, marking with two fingers a page that will never be reached. On their way to medical school, two Islamic students from the twelfth century stop to consult a passage in one of the books they are carrying. Pointing to the right-hand page of a book open on his lap, the Child Jesus explains his reading to the elders in the Temple while they, astonished and unconvinced, vainly turn the pages of their respective tomes in search of a refutation.

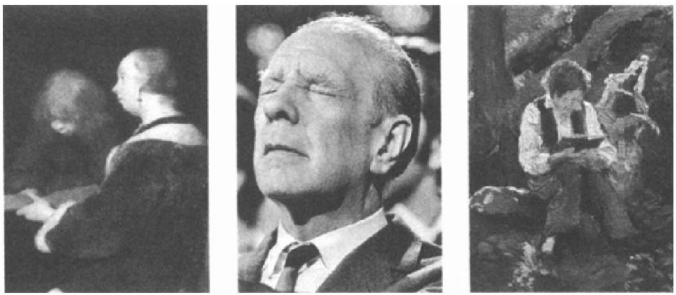
Beautiful as when she was alive, watched by an attentive lap-dog, the Milanese noblewoman Valentina Balbiani flips through the pages of her marble book on the lid of a tomb that carries, in bas-relief, the image of her emaciated body. Far from the busy city, amid sand and parched rocks, Saint Jerome, like an elderly commuter awaiting a train, reads a tabloid-sized manuscript while, in a corner, a lion lies listening. The great humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus shares with his friend Gilbert Cousin a joke in

the book he is reading, held open on the lectern in front of him. Kneeling among oleander blossoms, a seventeenth-century Indian poet strokes his beard as he reflects on the verses he's just read out loud to himself to catch their full flavour, clasping the preciously bound book in his left hand. Standing next to a long row of roughly hewn shelves, a Korean monk pulls out one of the eighty thousand wooden tablets of the seven-centuries-old *Tripitaka Koreana* and holds it in front of him, reading with silent attention. "Study To Be Quiet" is the advice given by the unknown stained-glass artist who portrayed the fisherman and essayist Izaak Walton reading a little book by the shores of the River Itchen near Winchester Cathedral.

From left to right, top to bottom: a Mogul poet by Muhammad Ali, the library at the Haeinsa Temple in Korea, Izaak Walton by an anonymous nineteenth-century

English artist, Mary Magdalene by Emmanuel Benner, Dickens giving a reading, a young man on the Paris *quais.*

Stark naked, a well-coiffed Mary Magdalen, apparently unrepentant, lies on a cloth strewn over a rock in the wilderness, reading a large illustrated volume. Drawing on his acting talents, Charles Dickens holds up a copy of one of his own novels, from which he is going to read to an adoring public. Leaning on a stone parapet overlooking the Seine, a young man loses himself in a book (what is it?) held open in front of him. Impatient or merely bored, a mother holds up a book for her red-haired son as he tries to follow the words with his right hand on the page. The blind Jorge Luis Borges screws up his eyes the better to hear the words of an unseen reader. In a dappled forest, sitting on a mossy trunk, a boy holds in both hands a small book from which he's reading in soft quiet, master of time and of space.



From left to right: a mother teaching her son to read by Gerard ter Borch, Jorge Luis Borges by Eduardo Comesaña, a forest scene by Hans Toma.

All these are readers, and their gestures, their craft, the pleasure, responsibility and power they derive from reading, are common with mine.

I am not alone.

I first discovered that I could read at the age of four. I had seen, over and over again, the letters that I knew (because I had been told) were the names of the pictures under which they sat. The

boy drawn in thick black lines, dressed in red shorts and a green shirt (that same red and green cloth from which all the other images in the book were cut, dogs and cats and trees and thin tall mothers), was also somehow, I realized, the stern black shapes beneath him, as if the boy's body had been dismembered into three clean-cut figures: one arm and the torso, **b;** the severed head so perfectly round, **o;** and the limp, low-hanging legs, y. I drew eyes in the round face, and a smile, and filled in the hollow circle of the torso. But there was more: I knew that not only did these shapes mirror the boy above them, but they also could tell me precisely what the boy was doing, arms stretched out and legs apart. **The boy runs**, said the shapes. He wasn't jumping, as I might have thought, or pretending to be frozen into place, or playing a game whose rules and purpose were unknown to me. **The boy runs.**

And yet these realizations were common acts of conjuring, less interesting because someone else had performed them for me. Another reader — my nurse, probably — had explained the shapes and now, every time the pages opened to the image of this exuberant boy, I knew what the shapes beneath him meant. There was pleasure in this, but it wore thin. There was no surprise.

Then one day, from the window of a car (the destination of that journey is now forgotten), I saw a billboard by the side of the road. The sight could not have lasted very long; perhaps the car stopped for a moment, perhaps it just slowed down long enough for me to see, large and looming, shapes similar to those in my book, but shapes that I had never seen before. And yet, all of a sudden, I knew what they were; I heard them in my head, they metamorphosed from black lines and white spaces into a solid, sonorous, meaningful reality. I had done this all by myself. No one had performed the magic for me. I and the shapes were alone together, revealing ourselves in a silently respectful dialogue. Since I could turn bare lines into living reality, I was all-powerful, I could read.

What that word was on the long-past billboard I no longer know (vaguely I seem to remember a word with several *A*s in it), but the impression of suddenly being able to comprehend what before I

could only gaze at is as vivid today as it must have been then. It was like acquiring an entirely new sense, so that now certain things no longer consisted merely of what my eyes could see, my ears could hear, my tongue could taste, my nose could smell, my fingers could feel, but of what my whole body could decipher, translate, give voice to, read.

The readers of books, into whose family I was unknowingly entering (we always think that we are alone in each discovery, and that every experience, from death to birth, is terrifyingly unique), extend or concentrate a function common to us all. Reading letters on a page is only one of its many guises. The astronomer reading a map of stars that no longer exist; the Japanese architect reading the land on which a house is to be built so as to guard it from evil forces; the zoologist reading the spoor of animals in the forest; the card-player reading her partner's gestures before playing the winning card; the dancer reading the choreographer's notations, and the public reading the dancer's movements on the stage; the weaver reading the intricate design of a carpet being woven; the organ-player reading various simultaneous strands of music orchestrated on the page; the parent reading the baby's face for signs of joy or fright, or wonder; the Chinese fortune-teller reading the ancient marks on the shell of a tortoise; the lover blindly reading the loved one's body at night, under the sheets; the psychiatrist helping patients read their own bewildering dreams; the Hawaiian fisherman reading the ocean currents by plunging a hand into the water; the farmer reading the weather in the sky — all these share with book-readers the craft of deciphering and translating signs. Some of these readings are coloured by the knowledge that the thing read was created for this specific purpose by other human beings — music notation or road signs, for instance — or by the gods — the tortoise shell, the sky at night. Others belong to chance.

An example of *Chia-ku-wen*, or "bone-and-shell script," on a tortoise carapace, *c.* 1300–1100 BC.

And yet, in every case, it is the reader who reads the sense; it is the reader who grants or recognizes in an object, place or event a certain possible readability; it is the reader who must attribute meaning to a system of signs, and then decipher it. We all read ourselves and the world around us in order to glimpse what and where we are. We read to understand, or to begin to understand. We cannot do but read. Reading, almost as much as breathing, is our essential function.

I didn't learn to write until much later, until I was seven. I could perhaps live without writing. I don't think I could live without reading. Reading — I discovered — comes before writing. A society can exist — many do exist — without writing,[1] but no society can exist without reading. According to the ethnologist Philippe Descola,[2] societies without writing have a linear sense of time, while in societies called literate the sense of time is cumulative; both societies move within those different but equally complex times by reading the multitude of signs the world has to

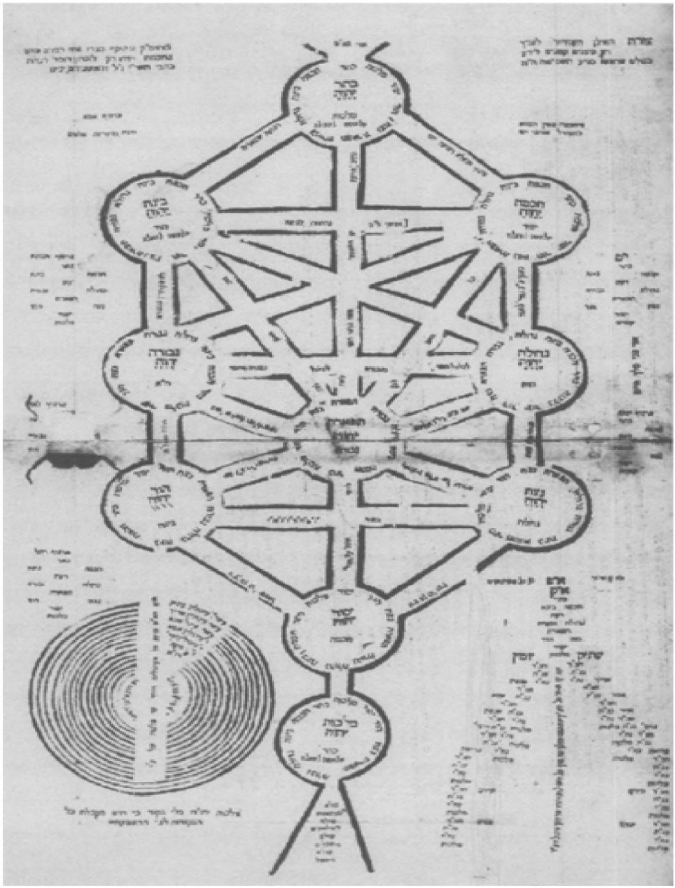
offer. Even in societies that set down a record of their passing, reading precedes writing; the would-be writer must be able to recognize and decipher the social system of signs before setting them down on the page. For most literate societies — for Islam, for Jewish and Christian societies such as my own, for the ancient Mayas, for the vast Buddhist cultures — reading is at the beginning of the social contract; learning how to read was my rite of passage.

Once I had learned to read my letters, I read everything: books, but also notices, advertisements, the small type on the back of tramway tickets, letters tossed into the garbage, weathered newspapers caught under my bench in the park, graffiti, the back covers of magazines held by other readers in the bus. When I found that Cervantes, in his fondness for reading, read “even the bits of torn paper in the street”,[3] I knew exactly what urge drove him to this scavenging. This worship of the book (on scroll, paper or screen) is one of the tenets of a literate society. Islam takes the notion even further: the Koran is not only one of the creations of God but one of His attributes, like His omnipresence or His compassion.

Experience came to me first through books. When later in life I came across an event or circumstance or character similar to one I had read about, it usually had the slightly startling but disappointing feeling of *déjà vu*, because I imagined that what was now taking place had already happened to me in words, had already been named. The earliest extant Hebrew text of systematic, speculative thought — the *Sefer Yezirah*, written sometime in the sixth century — states that God created the world by means of thirty-two secret paths of wisdom, ten *Sefirot* or numbers and twenty-two letters.[4] From the *Sefirot* were created all abstract things; from the twenty-two letters were created all the real beings in the three strata of the cosmos — the world, time and the human body. The universe, in Judaeo-Christian tradition, is conceived of as a written Book made from numbers and letters; the key to understanding the universe lies in our ability to read these properly and master their combination, and thereby learn to give life to some part of that colossal text, in imitation of our

Maker. (According to a fourth-century legend, the Talmudic scholars Hanani and Hoshaiah would once a week study the *Sefer Yezirah* and, by the right combination of letters, create a three-year-old calf which they would then have for dinner.)

My books were to me transcriptions or glosses of that other, colossal Book. Miguel de Unamuno,[5] in a sonnet, speaks of Time, whose source is in the future; my reading life gave me that same impression of flowing against the current, living out what I had read. The street outside the house was full of malignant men going about their murky business. The desert, which lay not far from our house in Tel Aviv, where I lived until the age of six, was prodigious because I knew there was a City of Brass buried under its sands, just beyond the asphalt road. Jelly was a mysterious substance which I had never seen but which I knew about from Enid Blyton's books, and which never matched, when I finally tasted it, the quality of that literary ambrosia. I wrote to my far-away grandmother, complaining about some minor misery and thinking she'd be the source of the same magnificent freedom my literary orphans found when they discovered long-lost relatives; instead of rescuing me from my sorrows, she sent the letter to my parents, who found my complaints mildly amusing. I believed in sorcery, and was certain that one day I'd be granted three wishes which countless stories had taught me how not to waste. I prepared myself for encounters with ghosts, with death, with talking animals, with battle; I made complicated plans for travel to adventurous islands on which Sinbad would become my bosom friend. Only when, years later, I touched for the first time my lover's body did I realize that literature could sometimes fall short of the actual event.



A page from the kabbalistic text *Pa'amon ve-Rimmon*, printed in Amsterdam in 1708, showing the ten *Sefirot.*

The Canadian essayist Stan Persky once said to me that "for readers, there must be a million autobiographies", since we seem

to find, in book after book, the traces of our lives. “To write down one’s impressions of *Hamlet* as one reads it year after year,” wrote Virginia Woolf, “would be virtually to record one’s own autobiography, for as we know more of life, so Shakespeare comments upon what we know.”[6] For me it was somewhat different. If books were autobiographies, they were so before the event, and I recognized later happenings from what I had read earlier in H.G. Wells, in *Alice in Wonderland*, in Edmondo De Amicis’s lacrimose *Cuore*, in the adventures of Bomba, the Jungle Boy. Sartre, in his memoirs, confessed to much the same experience. Comparing the flora and fauna discovered in the pages of the *Encyclopédie Larousse* with their counterparts in the Luxembourg Gardens, he found that “the apes in the zoo were less ape, the people in the Luxembourg Gardens were less people. Like Plato, I passed from knowledge to its subject. I found more reality in the idea than in the thing because it was given to me first and because it was given as a thing. It was in books that I encountered the universe: digested, classified, labelled, meditated, still formidable.”[7]

Reading gave me an excuse for privacy, or perhaps gave a sense to the privacy imposed on me, since throughout my childhood, after we returned to Argentina in 1955, I lived apart from the rest of my family, looked after by my nurse in a separate section of the house. Then my favourite reading-place was on the floor of my room, lying on my stomach, feet hooked under a chair. Afterwards, my bed late at night became the safest, most secluded place for reading in that nebulous region between being awake and being asleep. I don’t remember ever feeling lonely; in fact, on the rare occasions when I met other children I found their games and their talk far less interesting than the adventures and dialogues I read in my books. The psychologist James Hillman argues that those who have read stories or had stories read to them in childhood “are in better shape and have a better prognosis than those to whom story must be introduced…. Coming early with life it is already a perspective on life.” For Hillman, these first readings become “something lived in and lived through, a way in which the soul finds itself in life.”[8] To these readings, and for that

reason, I've returned again and again, and return still.

Since my father was in the diplomatic service, we travelled a great deal; books gave me a permanent home, and one I could inhabit exactly as I felt like, at any time, no matter how strange the room in which I had to sleep or how unintelligible the voices outside my door. Many nights I would turn on my bedside lamp, while my nurse either worked away at her electric knitting-machine or slept snoring in the bed across from mine, and try both to reach the end of the book I was reading, and to delay the end as much as possible, going back a few pages, looking for a section I had enjoyed, checking details that I thought had escaped me.

I never talked to anyone about my reading; the need to share came afterwards. At the time, I was superbly selfish, and I identified completely with Stevenson's lines:

> This was the world and I was king;
> For me the bees came by to sing,
> For me the swallows flew.[9]

Each book was a world unto itself, and in it I took refuge. Though I knew myself incapable of making up stories such as my favourite authors wrote, I felt that my opinions frequently coincided with theirs, and (to use Montaigne's phrase) "I took to trailing far behind them, murmuring, 'Hear, hear.'"[10] Later I was able to dissociate myself from their fiction; but in my childhood and much of my adolescence, what the book told me, however fantastical, was true at the time of my reading, and as tangible as the stuff of which the book itself was made. Walter Benjamin described the same experience. "What my first books were to me — to remember this I should first have to forget all other knowledge of books. It is certain that all I know of them today rests on the readiness with which I then opened myself to books; but whereas now content, theme and subject-matter are extraneous to the book, earlier they were solely and entirely in it, being no more external or independent of it than are today the number of its pages or its paper. The world that revealed itself in the book and the book itself were never, at any price, to be divided. So with each book its content, too, its world, was palpably there, at hand.

But equally, this content and this world transfigured every part of the book. They burned within it, blazed from it; located not merely in its binding or its pictures, they were enshrined in chapter headings and opening letters, paragraphs and columns. You did not read books through; you dwelt, abided between their lines and, reopening them after an interval, surprised yourself at the spot where you had halted."[11]

Later, as an adolescent in my father's largely unused library in Buenos Aires (he had instructed his secretary to furnish the library, and she had bought books by the yard and sent them to be bound to the height of the shelves, so that the titles at the page-tops were in many cases trimmed, and sometimes even the first lines were missing), I made another discovery. I had begun to look up, in the elephantine Espasa-Calpe Spanish encyclopedia, the entries that somehow or other I imagined related to sex: "Masturbation", "Penis", "Vagina", "Syphilis", "Prostitution". I was always alone in the library, since my father used it only on the rare occasions when he had to meet someone at home rather than at his office. I was twelve or thirteen; I was curled up in one of the big armchairs, engrossed in an article on the devastating effects of gonorrhoea, when my father came in and settled himself at his desk. For a moment I was terrified that he would notice what it was I was reading, but then I realized that no one — not even my father, sitting barely a few steps away — could enter my reading-space, could make out what I was being lewdly told by the book I held in my hands, and that nothing except my own will could enable anyone else to know. The small miracle was a silent one, known only to myself. I finished the article on gonorrhoea more elated than shocked. Still later, in that same library, to complete my sexual education, I read Alberto Moravia's *The Conformist*, Guy Des Cars's *The Impure*, Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita.*

There was privacy not only in my reading, but also in determining what I would read, in choosing my books in those long-vanished bookstores of Tel Aviv, of Cyprus, of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, of Paris, of Buenos Aires. Many times I chose books by their covers. There were moments that I remember even

now: for instance, seeing the matte jackets of the Rainbow Classics (offered by the World Publishing Company of Cleveland, Ohio), and being delighted by the stamped bindings underneath, and coming away with *Hans Brinker or The Silver Skates* (which I never liked and never finished), *Little Women* and *Huckleberry Finn.* All these had May Lamberton Becker's introductions, called "How This Book Came to Be Written", and their gossip still seems to me one of the most exciting ways of talking about books. "So one cold morning in September, 1880, with a Scotch rain hammering at the windows, Stevenson drew close to the fire and began to write," read Ms Becker's introduction to *Treasure Island.* That rain and that fire accompanied me throughout the book.

I remember, in a bookstore in Cyprus, where our ship had stopped for a few days, a windowful of Noddy stories with their shrill-coloured covers, and the pleasure of imagining building Noddy's house with him from a box of building-blocks depicted on the page. (Later on, with no shame at all, I enjoyed Enid Blyton's The Wishing Chair series, which I didn't then know English librarians had branded "sexist and snobbish".) In Buenos Aires I discovered the pasteboard Robin Hood series, with the portrait of each hero outlined in black against the flat yellow background, and read there the pirate adventures of Emilio Salgari — *The Tigers of Malaysia* — the novels of Jules Verne and Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* I don't remember ever reading blurbs to find out what the books were about; I don't know if the books of my childhood had any.

I think I read in at least two ways. First, by following, breathlessly, the events and the characters without stopping to notice the details, the quickening pace of reading sometimes hurtling the story beyond the last page — as when I read Rider Haggard, the *Odyssey*, Conan Doyle and the German author of Wild West stories, Karl May. Secondly, by careful exploration, scrutinizing the text to understand its ravelled meaning, finding pleasure merely in the sound of the words or in the clues which the words did not wish to reveal, or in what I suspected was hidden deep in the story itself, something too terrible or too marvellous to be looked at. This second kind of reading — which had something of the quality of reading detective stories — I

discovered in Lewis Carroll, in Dante, in Kipling, in Borges. I also read according to what I thought a book was *supposed* to be (labelled by the author, by the publisher, by another reader). At twelve I read Chekhov's *The Hunt* in a series of detective novels and, believing Chekhov to be a Russian thriller writer, then read "Lady with a Lapdog" as if it had been composed by a rival of Conan Doyle's — and enjoyed it, even though I thought the mystery rather thin. In much the same way, Samuel Butler tells of a certain William Sefton Moorhouse who "imagined he was being converted to Christianity by reading Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which he had got by mistake for Butler's *Analogy*, on the recommendation of a friend. But it puzzled him a good deal."[12] In a story published in the 1940s, Borges suggested that to read Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* as if it had been written by James Joyce "would be sufficient renewal for those tenuous spiritual exercises."[13]

Spinoza, in his 1650 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (denounced by the Roman Catholic Church as a book "forged in hell by a renegade Jew and the devil"), had already observed: "It often happens that in different books we read histories in themselves similar, but which we judge very differently, according to the opinions we have formed of the authors. I remember once to have read in some book that a man named Orlando Furioso used to ride a kind of winged monster through the air, fly over any country he liked, kill unaided vast numbers of men and giants, and other such fancies which from the point of view of reason are obviously absurd. I read a very similar story, in Ovid, of Perseus, and also, in the books of Judges and Kings, of Samson, who alone and unarmed killed thousands of men, and of Elijah, who flew through the air and at last went up to heaven in a chariot of fire, with fiery horses. All these stories are obviously alike, but we judge them very differently. The first one sought to amuse, the second had a political object, the third a religious one."[14] I too, for the longest time, attributed purposes to the books I read, expecting, for instance, that Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* would preach to me because it was, I was told, a religious allegory — as if I were able to listen to what was taking place in the author's

mind at the moment of creation, and to gain proof that the author was indeed speaking the truth. Experience and a degree of common sense have not yet completely cured me of this superstitious vice.

Sometimes the books themselves were talismans: a certain two-volume set of *Tristram Shandy*, a Penguin edition of Nicholas Blake's *The Beast Must Die*, a tattered copy of Martin Gardner's *Annotated Alice* which I had bound (at the cost of a whole month's allowance) at a shady bookseller's. These I read with special care, and kept for special moments. Thomas à Kempis instructed his students to take "a book into thine hands as Simeon the Just took the Child Jesus into his arms to carry him and kiss him. And thou hast finished reading, close the book and give thanks for every word out of the mouth of God; because in the Lord's field thou hast found a hidden treasure."[15] And Saint Benedict, writing at a time when books were comparatively rare and expensive, ordered his monks to hold "if possible" the books they read "in their left hands, wrapped in the sleeve of their tunics, and resting on their knees; their right hands shall be uncovered with which to grip and turn the pages."[16] My adolescent reading did not entail such deep veneration or such careful rituals, but it possessed a certain secret solemnity and importance that I will not now deny.

I wanted to live among books. When I was sixteen, in 1964, I found a job, after school, at Pygmalion, one of the three Anglo-German bookstores of Buenos Aires. The owner was Lily Lebach, a German Jew who had fled the Nazis and settled in Buenos Aires in the late 1930s, and who set me the daily task of dusting each and every one of the books in the store — a method by which she thought (quite rightly) I would quickly get to know the stock and its location on the shelves. Unfortunately, many of the books tempted me beyond cleanliness; they wanted to be held and opened and inspected, and sometimes even that was not enough. A few times I stole a tempting book; I took it home with me, stashed away in my coat pocket, because I not only had to read it; I had to have it, to call it mine. The novelist Jamaica Kincaid, confessing to the similar crime of stealing books from her childhood library in Antigua, explained that her intention was not to steal; it was "just

that once I had read a book I couldn't bear to part with it."[17] I too soon discovered that one doesn't simply read *Crime and Punishment* or *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.* One reads a certain edition, a specific copy, recognizable by the roughness or smoothness of its paper, by its scent, by a slight tear on page 72 and a coffee ring on the right-hand corner of the back cover. The epistemological rule for reading, established in the second century, that the most recent text replaces the previous one, since it is supposed to contain it, has rarely been true in my case. In the early Middle Ages, scribes would supposedly "correct" errors they might perceive in the text they were copying, thereby producing a "better" text; for me, however, the edition in which I read a book for the first time became the *editio princeps*, with which all others must be compared. Printing has given us the illusion that all readers of *Don Quixote* are reading the same book. For me, even today, it is as if the invention of printing had never taken place, and each copy of a book remains as singular as the phoenix.

And yet, the truth is that particular books lend certain characteristics to particular readers. Implicit in the possession of a book is the history of the book's previous readings — that is to say, every new reader is affected by what he or she imagines the book to have been in previous hands. My second-hand copy of Kipling's autobiography, *Something of Myself*, which I bought in Buenos Aires, carries a handwritten poem on the flyleaf, dated the day of Kipling's death. The impromptu poet who owned this copy, was he an ardent imperialist? A lover of Kipling's prose who saw the artist through the jingoist patina? My imagined predecessor affects my reading because I find myself in dialogue with him, arguing this or that point. A book brings its own history to the reader.

Miss Lebach must have known that her employees pilfered books, but I suspect that, as long as she felt we did not exceed certain unspoken limits, she would allow the crime. Once or twice she saw me engrossed in a new arrival, and merely told me to get on with my work and to keep the book and read it at home, on my own time. Marvellous books came my way at her store: Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Pär

Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*, Salinger's *Nine Stories*, Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, Herbert Read's *The Green Child*, Italo Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno*, the poems of Rilke, of Dylan Thomas, of Emily Dickinson, of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Egyptian love lyrics translated by Ezra Pound, the epic of Gilgamesh.

One afternoon, Jorge Luis Borges came to the bookstore accompanied by his eighty-eight-year-old mother. He was famous, but I had read only a few of his poems and stories and I did not feel overwhelmed by his literature. He was almost completely blind and yet he refused to carry a cane, and he would pass a hand over the shelves as if his fingers could see the titles. He was looking for books to help him study Anglo-Saxon, which had become his latest passion, and we had ordered for him Skeat's dictionary and an annotated version of *Battle of Maldon.* Borges's mother grew impatient; "Oh Georgie," she said. "I don't know why you waste your time with Anglo-Saxon, instead of studying something useful like Latin or Greek!" In the end, he turned and asked me for several books. I found a few and made note of the others and then, as he was about to leave, he asked me if I was busy in the evenings because he needed (he said this very apologetically) someone to read to him, since his mother now tired very easily. I said I would.

Over the next two years I read to Borges, as did many other fortunate and casual acquaintances, either in the evenings or, if school allowed it, in the mornings. The ritual was always very much the same. Ignoring the elevator, I would climb the stairs to his apartment (stairs similar to the ones Borges had once climbed carrying a newly acquired copy of *The Arabian Nights*; he failed to notice an open window and received a bad cut which turned septic, leading him to delirium and to the belief that he was going mad); I would ring the bell; I would be led by the maid through a curtained entrance into the small sitting-room where Borges would come and meet me, soft hand outstretched. There were no preliminaries; he would sit expectantly on the couch while I took my place in an armchair, and in a slightly asthmatic voice he would suggest that night's reading. "Shall we choose Kipling tonight? Eh?" And of course he didn't really expect an answer.

In that sitting-room, under a Piranesi engraving of circular

Roman ruins, I read Kipling, Stevenson, Henry James, several entries of the Brockhaus German encyclopedia, verses of Marino, of Enrique Banchs, of Heine (but these last ones he knew by heart, so I would barely have begun my reading when his hesitant voice picked up and recited from memory; the hesitation was only in the cadence, not in the words themselves, which he remembered unerringly). I had not read many of these authors before, so the ritual was a curious one. I would discover a text by reading it out loud, while Borges used his ears as other readers use their eyes, to scan the page for a word, for a sentence, for a paragraph that would confirm a memory. When I read he'd interrupt, commenting on the text in order (I think) to take note of it in his mind.

Stopping me after a line he found side-splitting in Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights* ("dressed and painted to represent a person connected with the Press in reduced circumstances" — "How can someone be dressed like that, eh? What do you think Stevenson had in mind? Being impossibly precise? Eh?"), he proceeded to analyse the stylistic device of defining someone or something by means of an image or category that, while appearing to be exact, forces the reader to make up a personal definition. He and his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares had played on that idea in an eleven-word short story: "The stranger climbed the stairs in the dark: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock."

Listening to my reading of Kipling's story "Beyond the Pale", Borges interrupted me after a scene in which a Hindu widow sends a message to her lover, made up of different objects collected in a bundle. He remarked on the poetic appropriateness of this, and wondered out loud whether Kipling had invented this concrete and yet symbolic language.[18] Then, as if scouring a mental library, he compared it to John Wilkins's "philosophical language" in which each word is a definition of itself. For instance, Borges noted that the word *salmon* does not tell us anything about the object it represents; *zana*, the corresponding word in Wilkins's language, based on pre-established categories, means "a scaly river fish with reddish flesh":[19] *z* for fish, *za* for river fish, *zan* for scaly river fish and *zana* for the scaly river fish with reddish flesh.

Reading to Borges always resulted in a mental reshuffling of my own books; that evening, Kipling and Wilkins stood side by side on the same imaginary shelf.

Another time (I can't remember what it was I had been asked to read), he began to compile an impromptu anthology of bad lines by famous authors, which included Keats's "The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold", Shakespeare's "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (Borges found "uncle" an unpoetic, inappropriate word for Hamlet to utter — he would have preferred "My father's brother!" or "My mother's kin!"), Webster's "We are merely the stars' tennis-balls" from *The Duchess of Malfi* and Milton's last lines in *Paradise Regained* — "he unobserv'd / Home to his Mother's house private return'd" — which made Christ out to be (Borges thought) an English gentleman in a bowler hat coming home to his mum for tea.

Sometimes he'd make use of the readings for his own writing. His discovery of a ghost tiger in Kipling's "The Guns of 'Fore and 'Aft", which we read shortly before Christmas, led him to compose one of his last stories, "Blue Tigers"; Giovanni Papini's "Two Images in a Pond" inspired his "August 24, 1982", a date which was then still in the future; his irritation with Lovecraft (whose stories he had me start and abandon half a dozen times) made him create a "corrected" version of a Lovecraft story and publish it in *Dr. Brodie's Report.* Often he'd ask me to write something down on the endpaper pages of the book we were reading — a chapter reference or a thought. I don't know how he made use of these, but the habit of speaking of a book behind its back became mine too.

There is a story by Evelyn Waugh in which a man, rescued by another in the midst of the Amazonian jungle, is forced by his rescuer to read Dickens out loud for the rest of his life.[20] I never had the sense of merely fulfilling a duty in my reading to Borges; instead, the experience felt like a sort of happy captivity. I was enthralled not so much by the texts he was making me discover (many of which eventually became my own favourites) as by his comments, which were vastly but unobtrusively erudite, very funny, sometimes cruel, almost always indispensable. I felt I was

the unique owner of a carefully annotated edition, compiled for my exclusive sake. Of course, I wasn't; I (like many others) was simply his notebook, an *aide-mémoire* which the blind man required in order to assemble his ideas. I was more than willing to be used.

Before meeting Borges, either I had read silently on my own, or someone had read aloud to me a book of my choice. Reading out loud to the blind old man was a curious experience because, even though I felt, with some effort, in control of the tone and pace of the reading, it was nevertheless Borges, the listener, who became the master of the text. I was the driver, but the landscape, the unfurling space, belonged to the one being driven, for whom there was no other responsibility than that of apprehending the country outside the windows. Borges chose the book, Borges stopped me or asked me to continue, Borges interrupted to comment, Borges allowed the words to come to him. I was invisible.

I quickly learned that reading is cumulative and proceeds by geo-metrical progression: each new reading builds upon whatever the reader has read before. I began by making assumptions about the stories Borges chose for me — that Kipling's prose would be stilted, Stevenson's childish, Joyce's unintelligible — but very soon prejudice gave way to experience, and the discovery of one story made me look forward to another, which in turn became enriched by the memory of both Borges's reactions and my own. The progression of my reading never followed the conventional sequence of time. For instance, reading out loud to him texts that I had read before on my own modified those earlier solitary readings, widened and suffused my memory of them, made me perceive what I had not perceived at the time but seemed to recall now, triggered by his response. "There are those who, while reading a book, recall, compare, conjure up emotions from other, previous readings," remarked the Argentinian writer Ezequiel Martínez Estrada. "This is one of the most delicate forms of adultery."[21] Borges disbelieved in systematic bibliographies and encouraged such adulterous reading.

Aside from Borges, a few friends, several teachers and a review here and there have suggested titles now and again, but

largely my encounters with books have been a matter of chance, like meeting those passing strangers who in the fifteenth canto of Dante's Hell "eye one another when the daylight fades to dusk and a new moon is in the sky", and who suddenly find in an appearance, a glance, a word, an irresistible attraction.

I first kept my books in straight alphabetical order, by author. Then I began dividing them by genre: novels, essays, plays, poems. Later on I tried grouping them by language, and when, during the course of my travels, I was obliged to keep only a few, I separated them into those I hardly ever read, those I read all the time and those I was hoping to read. Sometimes my library obeyed secret rules, born from idiosyncratic associations. The Spanish novelist Jorge Semprún kept Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* among his books on Buchenwald, the concentration camp in which he had been interned, because the novel opens with a scene at Weimar's Elephant Hotel, where Semprún was taken after his liberation.[22] Once I thought it would be amusing to construct from such groupings a history of literature, exploring, for instance, the relationships between Aristotle, Auden, Jane Austen and Marcel Aymé (in my alphabetical order), or between Chesterton, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Borges, Saint John of the Cross and Lewis Carroll (among those I most enjoy). It seemed to me that the literature taught at school — in which links were explained between Cervantes and Lope de Vega based on the fact that they shared a century, and in which Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Platero y yo* (a purple tale of a poet's infatuation with a donkey) was considered a masterpiece — was as arbitrary or as permissible a selection as the literature I could construct myself, based on my findings along the crooked road of my own readings and the size of my own bookshelves. The history of literature, as consecrated in school manuals and official libraries, appeared to me to be nothing more than the history of certain readings — albeit older and better informed than mine, but no less dependent on chance and on circumstance.

One year before graduating from high school, in 1966, when the military government of General Onganía came to power, I discovered yet another system by which a reader's books can be

arranged. Under suspicion of being Communist or obscene, certain titles and certain authors were placed on the censor's list, and in the ever-increasing police checks in cafés, bars and train stations, or simply on the street, it became as important not to be seen with a suspicious book in hand as it was to carry proper identification. The banned authors — Pablo Neruda, J.D. Salinger, Maxim Gorky, Harold Pinter — formed another, different history of literature, whose links were neither evident nor everlasting, and whose communality was revealed exclusively by the punctilious eye of the censor.

But not only totalitarian governments fear reading. Readers are bullied in schoolyards and in locker-rooms as much as in government offices and prisons. Almost everywhere, the community of readers has an ambiguous reputation that comes from its acquired authority and perceived power. Something in the relationship between a reader and a book is recognized as wise and fruitful, but it is also seen as disdainfully exclusive and excluding, perhaps because the image of an individual curled up in a corner, seemingly oblivious of the grumblings of the world, suggests impenetrable privacy and a selfish eye and singular secretive action. ("Go out and live!" my mother would say when she saw me reading, as if my silent activity contradicted her sense of what it meant to be alive.) The popular fear of what a reader might do among the pages of a book is like the ageless fear men have of what women might do in the secret places of their body, and of what witches and alchemists might do in the dark behind locked doors. Ivory, according to Virgil, is the material out of which the Gate of False Dreams is made; according to Sainte-Beuve, it is also the material out of which is made the reader's tower.

Borges once told me that, during one of the populist demonstrations organized by Perón's government in 1950 against the opposing intellectuals, the demonstrators chanted, "Shoes yes, books no." The re-tort, "Shoes yes, books yes," convinced no one. Reality — harsh, necessary reality — was seen to conflict irredeemably with the evasive dreamworld of books. With this excuse, and with increasing effect, the artificial dichotomy between life and reading is actively encouraged by those in power. Demotic regimes demand that we forget, and therefore they brand

books as superfluous luxuries; totalitarian regimes demand that we not think, and therefore they ban and threaten and censor; both, by and large, require that we become stupid and that we accept our degradation meekly, and therefore they encourage the consumption of pap. In such circumstances, readers cannot but be subversive.

And so I ambitiously proceed from my history as a reader to the history of the act of reading. Or rather, to *a* history of reading, since any such history — made up of particular intuitions and private circumstances — must be only one of many, however impersonal it may try to be. Ultimately, perhaps, the history of reading is the history of each of its readers. Even its starting-point has to be fortuitous. Reviewing a history of mathematics published sometime in the mid-thirties, Borges wrote that it suffered "from a crippling defect: the chronological order of its events doesn't correspond to its logical and natural order. The definition of its elements very frequently comes last, practice precedes theory, the intuitive labours of its precursors are less comprehensible for the profane reader than those of the modern mathematicians."[23] Much the same can be said of a history of reading. Its chronology cannot be that of political history. The Sumerian scribe for whom reading was a much-valued prerogative had a keener sense of responsibility than the reader in today's New York or Santiago, since an article of law or a settling of accounts depended on his exclusive interpretation. The reading methods of the late Middle Ages, defining when and how to read, distinguishing, for instance, between the text to be read aloud and the text to be read silently, were much more clearly established than those taught in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna or in Edwardian England. Nor can a history of reading follow the coherent succession of the history of literary criticism; the qualms expressed by the nineteenth-century mystic Anna Katharina Emmerich (that the printed text never equalled her experience)[24] were even more strongly expressed two thousand years earlier by Socrates (who found books an impediment to learning)[25] and in our time by the German critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger (who praised illiteracy and proposed a return to the

original creativity of oral literature).[26] This position was refuted by the American essayist Allan Bloom,[27] among many others; with splendid anachronism, Bloom was amended and improved by his precursor, Charles Lamb, who in 1833 confessed that he loved to lose himself "in other men's minds. When I am not walking," he said, "I am reading; I cannot sit and think. Books think for me."[28] Neither does the history of reading correspond to the chronologies of the histories of literature, since the history of reading one particular author often finds a beginning not with that author's first book but with one of the author's future readers: the Marquis de Sade was rescued from the condemned shelves of pornographic literature, where his books had sat for over 150 years, by the bibliophile Maurice Heine and the French surrealists; William Blake, ignored for over two centuries, begins in our time with the enthusiasm of Sir Geoffrey Keynes and Northrop Frye, which made him obligatory reading on every college curriculum.

Told that we are threatened with extinction, we, today's readers, have yet to learn what reading is. Our future — the future of the history of our reading — was explored by Saint Augustine, who tried to distinguish between the text seen in the mind and the text spoken out loud; by Dante, who questioned the limits of the reader's power of interpretation; by Lady Murasaki, who argued for the specificity of certain readings; by Pliny, who analysed the performance of reading, and the relationship between the writer who reads and the reader who writes; by the Sumerian scribes, who imbued the act of reading with political power; by the first makers of books, who found the methods of scroll-reading (like the methods we now use to read on our computers) too limiting and cumbersome, and offered us instead the possibility of flipping through pages and scribbling in margins. The past of that history lies ahead of us, on the last page in that cautionary future described by Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451*, in which books are carried not on paper but in the mind.

Like the act of reading itself, a history of reading jumps forward to our time — to me, to my experience as a reader — and then goes back to an early page in a distant foreign century. It skips chapters, browses, selects, rereads, refuses to follow conventional

order. Paradoxically, the fear that opposes reading to active life, that urged my mother to move me from my seat and my book out into the open air, recognizes a solemn truth: “You cannot embark on life, that one-off coach ride, once again when it is over,” writes the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk in *The White* Castle, “but if you have a book in your hand, no matter how complex or difficult to understand that book may be, when you have finished it, you can, if you wish, go back to the beginning, read it again, and thus understand that which is difficult and, with it, understand life as well.”[29]

ACTS

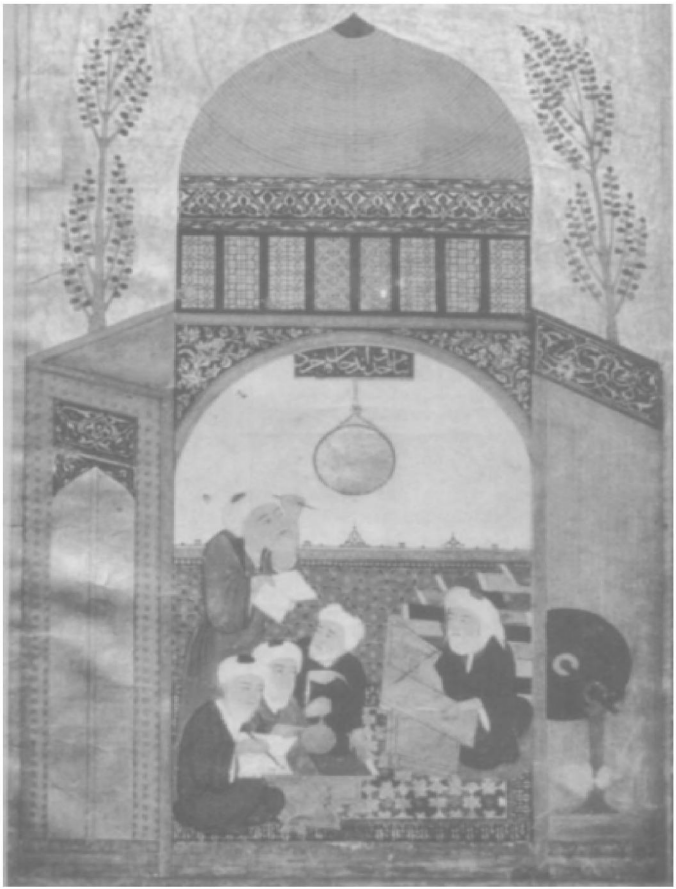
of

READING

Reading means approaching something that is just coming into being.

ITALO CALVINO

If on a winter's night a traveller, 1979



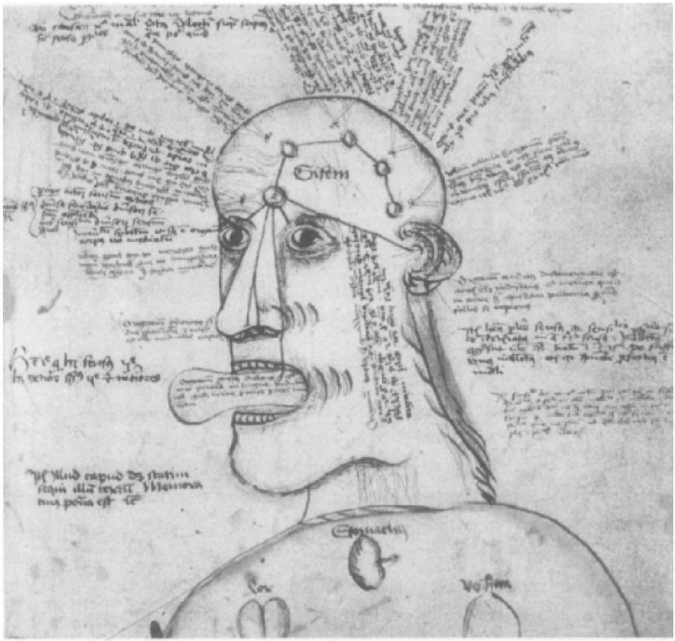
Teaching optics and the laws of perception in a sixteenth-century Islamic school.

films of atoms that flowed from the surface of every object and entered our eyes and minds like a constant and ascending rain, drenching us in all the qualities of the object.[8] Euclid, Epicurus's contemporary, proposed the contrary theory: that rays are sent out of the observer's eyes to apprehend the object observed.[9] Seemingly insurmountable problems riddled both theories. For instance, in the case of the first, the so-called "intromission" theory, how could the film of atoms emitted by a large object — an elephant or Mount Olympus — enter so small a space as the human eye? As to the second, the "extromission" theory, what ray could issue from the eyes and in a fraction of a second reach the distant stars we see every night?

A few decades earlier Aristotle had suggested another theory. Anticipating and correcting Epicurus, he had argued that the qualities of the thing observed — rather than a film of atoms — travelled through air (or some other medium) to the eye of the observer, so that what was apprehended was not the actual dimensions but the relative size and shape of a mountain. The human eye, according to Aristotle, was like a chameleon, taking in the form and colour of the observed object and passing this information, via the eye's humours, on to the all-powerful innards (*splanchna*),[10] a conglomerate of organs that included the heart, liver, lungs, gall-bladder and blood vessels, and held dominion over motion and senses.[11]

Six centuries later, the Greek physician Galen offered a fourth solution, contradicting Epicurus and following Euclid. Galen proposed that a "visual spirit", born in the brain, crossed the eye through the optic nerve and flowed out into the air. The air itself then became capable of perception, apprehending the qualities of the objects perceived however far away they might happen to be. These qualities were re-transmitted back through the eye to the brain, and down the spinal cord to the nerves of sense and motion. For Aristotle, the observer was a passive entity receiving through the air the thing observed, which was then communicated to the heart, seat of all sensations — including vision. For Galen, the observer, rendering the air sentient, held an active role, and the root from which vision stemmed lay deep in the brain.

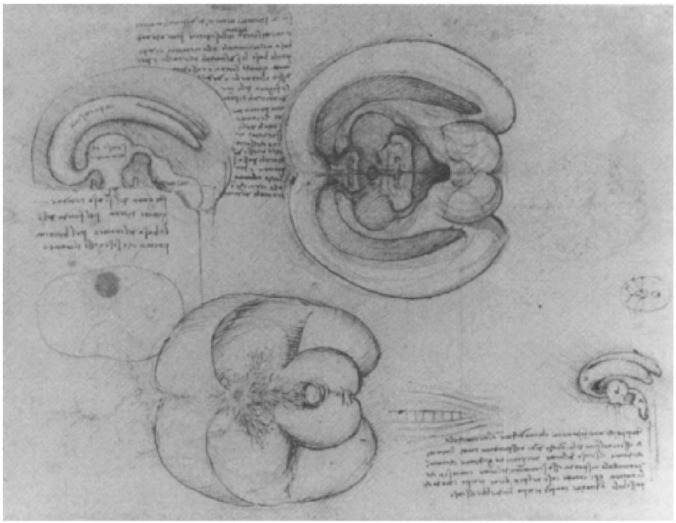
Medieval scholars, for whom Galen and Aristotle were the fountainheads of scientific learning, generally believed that a hierarchical relation could be found between these two theories. It was not a question of one theory overriding the other; what mattered was to extract from each an understanding of how the different parts of the body related to perceptions of the outside world — and also how these parts related to one another. The fourteenth-century Italian doctor Gentile da Foligno decreed that such an understanding was “as essential a step in medicine as learning the alphabet is in reading,”[12] and recalled that Saint Augustine, among other early Fathers of the Church, had already considered the question carefully. For Saint Augustine, both the brain and the heart functioned as shepherds of that which the senses stored in our memory, and he used the verb *colligere* (meaning both “to collect” and “to summarize”) to describe how these impressions were gathered from memory’s separate compartments, and “shepherded out of their old lairs, because there is no other place where they could have gone”.[13]



A depiction of the functions of the brain in a fifteenth-century manuscript of Aristotle's *De anima.*

Memory was only one of the functions that benefited from this husbandry of the senses. It was commonly accepted by medieval scholars that (as Galen had suggested) sight, sound, smell, taste and touch fed into a general sensorial repository located in the brain, an area sometimes known as "common sense", from which derived not only memory but also knowledge, fantasy and dreams. This area, in turn, was connected to Aristotle's *splanchna*, now reduced by the medieval commentators to just the heart, the centre of all feeling. Thus the senses were ascribed a direct kinship with the brain while the heart was declared the body's ultimate ruler.[14] A late-fifteenth-century manuscript in German, of

Aristotle's treatise on logic and natural philosophy, depicts the head of a man, eyes and mouth open, nostrils flaring, one ear carefully underlined. Inside the brain are five small connected circles representing, from left to right, the principal site of common sense, and then the sites of imagination, fantasy, cogitative power and memory. According to the accompanying gloss, the circle of common sense is related as well to the heart, also depicted in the drawing. This diagram is a fair example of how the process of perception was imagined in the late Middle Ages, with one small addendum: though it was not represented in this illustration, it was commonly supposed (going back to Galen) that at the base of the brain was a "marvellous net" — *rete mirabile* — of small vessels that acted as communication channels when whatever reached the brain was refined. This *rete mirabile* appears in a drawing of a brain that Leonardo da Vinci made around the year 1508, clearly marking the separate ventricles and attributing to different sections the various mental faculties. According to Leonardo, "the *senso comune* [common sense] is that which judges the impressions transmitted by the other senses…and its place is in the middle of the head, between the *impresiva* [impression centre] and the *memoria* [centre of memory]. The surrounding objects transmit their images to the senses and the senses pass these on to the *impresiva.* The *impresiva* communicates them to the *senso comune* and, from there, they are imprinted in the memory where they become more or less fixed, according to the importance and force of the object in question."[15] The human mind, in Leonardo's time, was seen as a small laboratory where the material gathered in by the eyes, ears and other organs of perception became "impressions" in the brain that were channelled through the centre of common sense and then transformed into one or several faculties — such as memory — under the influence of the supervising heart. The sight of black letters (to use an alchemical image) became through this process the gold of knowledge.



Leonardo Da Vinci's drawing of a brain, showing the *rete mirabile*.

But one fundamental question remained unsolved: did we, the readers, reach out and capture letters on a page, according to the theories of Euclid and Galen? Or did the letters reach out to our senses, as Epicurus and Aristotle had maintained? For Leonardo and his contemporaries, the answer (or hints towards an answer) could be found in a thirteenth-century translation of a book written two hundred years earlier (so long are sometimes the hesitancies of scholarship) in Egypt, by the Basra scholar al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham, known to the West as Alhazen.

Egypt flourished in the eleventh century under Fatimid rule, drawing its wealth from the Nile valley and from trade with its Mediterranean neighbours, while its sandy frontiers were protected by an army recruited from abroad — Berbers, Sudanese and Turks. This het-erogenous arrangement of international trade and mercenary warfare gave Fatimid Egypt all the advantages and aims of a truly cosmopolitan state.[16] In 1004 the caliph al-Hakim

the latter requiring a voluntary act of recognition — following a text on the page.[20] The importance of al-Haytham's argument was that it identified for the first time, in the act of perceiving, a gradation of conscious action that proceeds from "seeing" to "deciphering" or "reading".

Al-Haytham died in Cairo in 1038. Two centuries later, the English scholar Roger Bacon — attempting to justify the study of optics to Pope Clement IV at a time when certain factions within the Catholic Church were violently arguing that scientific research was contrary to Christian dogma — offered a revised summary of al-Haytham's theory.[21] Following al-Haytham (while at the same time underplaying the importance of Islamic scholarship), Bacon explained to His Holiness the mechanics of the intromission theory. According to Bacon, when we look at an object (a tree or the letters *SUN*) a visual pyramid is formed that has its base on the object itself and its apex at the centre of the curvature of the cornea. We "see" when the pyramid enters our eye and its rays are arranged on the surface of our eyeball, refracted in such a way that they do not intersect. Seeing, for Bacon, was the active process by which an image of the object entered the eye and was then grasped through the eye's "visual powers".

But how does this perception become reading? How does the act of apprehending letters relate to a process that involves not only sight and perception but inference, judgement, memory, recognition, knowledge, experience, practice? Al-Haytham knew (and Bacon no doubt agreed) that all these elements necessary to perform the act of reading lent it an astounding complexity, which required for its successful performance the co-ordination of a hundred different skills. And not only these skills but the time, place, and tablet, scroll, page or screen on which the act is performed affect the reading: for the anonymous Sumerian farmer, the village near where he tended his goats and sheep, and the rounded clay; for al-Haytham, the new white room of the Cairo academy, and the scornfully read Ptolemy manuscript; for Bacon, the prison cell to which he was condemned for his unorthodox teaching, and his precious scientific volumes; for Leonardo, the court of King François I, where he spent his last years, and the

notebooks he kept in a secret code which can be read only if held up to a mirror. All these bewilderingly diverse elements come together in that one act; this much, al-Haytham had surmised. But how it all took place, what intricate and formidable connections these elements established among themselves, was a question that, for al-Haytham and for his readers, remained unanswered.

The modern study of neurolinguistics, the relationship between brain and language, begins almost eight and a half centuries after al-Haytham, in 1865. That year, two French scientists, Michel Dax and Paul Broca,[22] suggested in simultaneous but separate studies that the vast majority of humankind, as a result of a genetic process which begins at conception, is born with a left cerebral hemisphere that will eventually become the dominant part of the brain for encoding and decoding language; a much smaller proportion, mostly left-handers or ambidextrous people, develop this function in the right cerebral hemisphere. In a few cases (in people genetically predisposed to a dominant left hemisphere), early damage to the left hemisphere results in a cerebral "reprogramming" and leads to development of the language function in the right hemisphere. But neither hemisphere will act as encoder and decoder until the person is actually exposed to language.

By the time the first scribe scratched and uttered the first letters, the human body was already capable of the acts of writing and reading that still lay in the future; that is to say, the body was able to store, recall and decipher all manner of sensations, including the arbitrary signs of written language yet to be invented.[23] This notion, that we are capable of reading before we can actually read — in fact, before we have even seen a page open in front of us — harks back to Platonic ideas of knowledge existing within us before the thing is perceived. Speech itself apparently evolves along the same pattern. We "discover" a word because the object or idea it represents is already in our mind, "ready to be linked up with the word".[24] It is as if we are offered a gift from the outside world (by our elders, by those who first speak to us) but the ability to grasp the gift is our own. In that sense, the

words spoken (and, later on, the words read) belong neither to us nor to our parents, to our authors; they occupy a space of shared meaning, a communal threshold which lies at the beginning of our relationship to the arts of conversation and reading.

According to Professor André Roch Lecours of Côte-des-Neiges Hospital in Montreal, exposure to oral language alone may not be enough for either hemisphere to develop the language functions fully; it may be that, for our brains to allow this development, we must be taught to recognize a shared system of visual signs. In other words, we must learn to read.[25]

In the 1980s, while working in Brazil, Professor Lecours came to the conclusion that the genetic program leading to the more common left cerebral dominance was less implemented in the brains of those who had not learned to read than in those who had. This suggested to him that the process of reading could be explored through cases of patients in whom the reading faculty had become impaired. (Galen long ago argued that a disease not only indicates the failure of the body to perform but also sheds light on the absent performance itself.) A few years later, studying patients suffering from speech or reading impediments in Montreal, Professor Lecours was able to make a series of observations regarding the mechanisms of reading. In examples of aphasia, for instance — where the patient has partially or completely lost the power or understanding of the spoken word — he found that specific lesions to the brain caused particular speech handicaps that were curiously restricted: some patients became incapable of reading or writing only irregularly spelled words (such as “rough” or “though” in English); others could not read invented words (“tooflow” or “boojum”); yet others could see but not pronounce certain oddly assorted words, or words unevenly disposed on the page. Sometimes these patients could read whole words but not syllables; sometimes they read by replacing certain words with others. Lemuel Gulliver, describing the Struld-bruggs of Laputa, noted that at age ninety these elderly worthies can no longer amuse themselves with reading, “because their Memory will not serve to carry them from the Beginning of a Sentence to the End; and by this Defect they are deprived of the

only Entertainment whereof they might otherwise be capable."[26] Several of Professor Lecours' patients suffered from just such a disorder. To complicate matters, in similar studies in China and Japan researchers observed that patients accustomed to reading ideograms as opposed to phonetic alphabets reacted differently to the investigations, as if these specific language functions were predominant in different areas of the brain.

Agreeing with al-Haytham, Professor Lecours concluded that the process of reading entailed at least two stages: "seeing" the word, and "considering" it according to learned information. Like the Sumerian scribe thousands of years ago, I face the words. I look at the words, I see the words, and what I see organizes itself according to a code or system which I have learned and which I share with other readers of my time and place — a code that has settled in specific sections of my brain. "It is," Professor Lecours argues, "as if the information received from the page by the eyes travels through the brain through a series of conglomerates of specialized neurons, each conglomerate occupying a certain section of the brain and effecting a specific function. We don't yet know what exactly each of these functions is, but in certain cases of brain lesions one or several of these conglomerates become, so to speak, disconnected from the chain and the patient becomes incapable of reading certain words, or a certain type of language, or of reading out loud, or replaces one set of words with another. The possible disconnections seem endless."[27]

Neither is the primary act of scanning the page with our eyes a continuous, systematic process. It is usually assumed that, when we are reading, our eyes travel smoothly, without interruptions, along the lines of a page, and that, when we are reading Western writing, for instance, our eyes go from left to right. This isn't so. A century ago, the French ophthalmologist Emile Javal discovered that our eyes actually jump about the page; these jumps or saccades take place three or four times per second, at a speed of about 200 degrees per second. The speed of the eye's motion across the page — but not the motion itself — interferes with perception, and it is only during the brief pause between movements that we actually "read". Why our sense of reading is

related to the continuity of the text on the page or to the scrolling of the text on the screen, assimilating entire sentences or thoughts, and not to the actual saccadic movement of the eyes, is a question which scientists have not yet been able to answer.[28]

Analysing the cases of two clinical patients — one an aphasic who could make eloquent speeches in a language that was gibberish, and the other an agnosic who could use ordinary language but was incapable of imbuing it with tone or emotion — Dr. Oliver Sacks argued that "speech — natural speech — does not consist of words alone…. It consists of utterance — an uttering-forth of one's whole meaning with one's whole being — the understanding of which involves infinitely more than mere word-recognition."[29] Much the same can be said of reading: following the text, the reader utters its meaning through a vastly entangled method of learned significances, social conventions, previous readings, personal experience and private taste. Reading in the Cairo academy, al-Haytham was not alone; reading over his shoulder, as it were, hovered the shadows of the Basra scholars who had taught him the Koran's sacred calligraphy in the Friday Mosque, of Aristotle and his lucid commentators, of the casual acquaintances with whom al-Haytham would have discussed Aristotle, of the various al-Haythams who throughout the years became at last the scientist that al-Hakim invited to his court.

An eleventh-century depiction of Saint Augustine at his lectern.

THE SILENT READERS

IN AD 383, almost half a century after Constantine the Great, first emperor of the Christian world, was baptized on his death-bed, a twenty-nine-year-old professor of Latin rhetoric whom future centuries would know as Saint Augustine arrived in Rome from one of the empire's outposts in North Africa. He rented a house, set up a school and attracted a number of students who had heard about the qualities of this provincial intellectual, but it wasn't long before it became clear to him that he wasn't going to be able to earn his living as a teacher in the imperial capital. Back home in Carthage his students had been rioting hooligans, but at least they had paid for their lessons; in Rome his pupils listened quietly to his disquisitions on Aristotle and Cicero until it came time to settle the fee, and then transferred *en masse* to another teacher, leaving Augustine empty-handed. So when, a year later, the Prefect of Rome offered him the opportunity of teaching literature and elocution in the city of Milan, and included travelling expenses in the offer, Augustine accepted gratefully.[1]

Perhaps because he was a stranger to the city and wanted intellectual company, or perhaps because his mother had asked him to do so, in Milan Augustine paid a visit to the city's bishop, the celebrated Ambrose, friend and adviser to Augustine's mother, Monica. Ambrose (who, like Augustine, was later to be canonized) was a man in his late forties, strict in his orthodox beliefs and unafraid of even the highest earthly powers; a few years after Augustine's arrival in Milan, Ambrose forced the emperor Theodosius I to show public repentance for ordering a massacre

of the rioters who had killed the Roman governor of Salonica.[2] And when the empress Justina requested that the bishop hand over a church in his city so that she could worship according to the rites of Arianism, Ambrose organized a sit-in, occupying the site night and day until she desisted.

A portrait of Saint Ambrose in the church that bears his name, in Milan.

According to a fifth-century mosaic, Ambrose was a small,

clever-looking man with big ears and a neat black beard that diminished rather than filled out his angular face. He was an extremely popular speaker; his symbol in later Christian iconography was the beehive, emblematic of eloquence.[3] Augustine, who considered Ambrose fortunate to be held in such high regard by so many people, found himself unable to ask the old man the questions about matters of the faith that were troubling him because, when Ambrose was not eating a frugal meal or entertaining one of his many admirers, he was alone in his cell, reading.

Ambrose was an extraordinary reader. “When he read,” said Augustine, “his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud.”[4]

Eyes scanning the page, tongue held still: that is exactly how I would describe a reader today, sitting with a book in a café across from the Church of St. Ambrose in Milan, reading, perhaps, Saint Augustine’s *Confessions.* Like Ambrose, the reader has become deaf and blind to the world, to the passing crowds, to the chalky flesh-coloured façades of the buildings. Nobody seems to notice a concentrating reader: withdrawn, intent, the reader becomes commonplace.

To Augustine, however, such reading manners seemed sufficiently strange for him to note them in his *Confessions.* The implication is that this method of reading, this silent perusing of the page, was in his time something out of the ordinary, and that normal reading was performed out loud. Even though instances of silent reading can be traced to earlier dates, not until the tenth century does this manner of reading become usual in the West.[5]

Augustine’s description of Ambrose’s silent reading (including the remark that he *never* read aloud) is the first definite instance recorded in Western literature. Earlier examples are far more uncertain. In the fifth century BC, two plays show characters reading on stage: in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, Theseus reads in silence a letter held by his dead wife; in Aristophanes’ *The*

Knights, Demosthenes looks at a writing-tablet sent by an oracle and, without saying out loud what it contains, seems taken aback by what he has read.[6] According to Plutarch, Alexander the Great read a letter from his mother in silence in the fourth century BC, to the bewilderment of his soldiers.[7] Claudius Ptolemy, in the second century AD, remarked in *On the Criterion* (a book that Augustine may have known) that sometimes people read silently when they are concentrating hard, because voicing the words is a distraction to thought.[8] And Julius Caesar, standing next to his opponent Cato in the Senate in 63 BC, silently read a little billet-doux sent to him by Cato's own sister.[9] Almost four centuries later, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, in a catechetical lecture probably delivered at Lent of the year 349, entreated the women in church to read, while waiting during the ceremonies, "quietly, however, so that, while their lips speak, no other ears may hear what they say"[10] — a whispered reading, perhaps, in which the lips fluttered with muffled sounds.

If reading out loud was the norm from the beginnings of the written word, what was it like to read in the great ancient libraries? The Assyrian scholar consulting one of the thirty thousand tablets in the library of King Ashurbanipal in the seventh century BC, the unfurlers of scrolls at the libraries of Alexandria and Pergamum, Augustine himself looking for a certain text in the libraries of Carthage and Rome, must have worked in the midst of a rumbling din. However, even today not all libraries preserve the proverbial silence. In the seventies, in Milan's beautiful Biblioteca Ambrosiana, there was nothing like the stately silence I had noticed in the British Library in London or the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The readers at the Ambrosiana spoke to one another from desk to desk; from time to time someone would call out a question or a name, a heavy tome would slam shut, a cartful of books would rattle by. These days, neither the British Library nor the Bibliothèque Nationale is utterly quiet; the silent reading is punctuated by the clicking and tapping of portable word-processors, as if flocks of woodpeckers lived inside the book-lined halls. Was it different then, in the days of Athens or Pergamum, trying to concentrate with dozens of readers laying out tablets or

the cadence of the sentences and lifting to one's lips the holy words, so that nothing of the divine could be lost in the reading. My grandmother read the Old Testament in this manner, mouthing the words and moving her body back and forth to the rhythm of her prayer. I can see her in her dim apartment in the Barrio del Once, the Jewish neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, intoning the ancient words from her bible, the only book in her house, whose black covers had come to resemble the texture of her own pale skin grown soft with age. Among Muslims too the entire body partakes of the holy reading. In Islam, the question of whether a sacred text is to be heard or read is of essential importance. The ninth-century scholar Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal phrased it in this manner: since the original Koran — the Mother of the Book, the Word of God as revealed by Allah to Muhammad — is uncreated and eternal, did it become present only in its utterance in prayer, or did it multiply its being on the perused page for the eye to read, copied out in different hands throughout the human ages? We do not know whether he received an answer, because in 833 his question earned him the condemnation of the *mihnah*, or Islamic inquisition, instituted by the Abassid caliphs.[17] Three centuries later, the legal scholar and theologian Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali established a series of rules for studying the Koran in which reading and hearing the text read became part of the same holy act. Rule number five established that the reader must follow the text slowly and distinctly in order to reflect on what he was reading. Rule number six was "for weeping…. If you do not weep naturally, then force yourself to weep", since grief should be implicit in the apprehension of the sacred words. Rule number nine demanded that the Koran be read "loud enough for the reader to hear it himself, because reading means distinguishing between sounds", thereby driving away distractions from the outside world.[18]

The American psychologist Julian Jaynes, in a controversial study on the origin of consciousness, argued that the bicameral mind — in which one of the hemispheres becomes specialized in silent reading — is a late development in humankind's evolution, and

that the process by which this function develops is still changing. He suggested that the earliest instances of reading might have been an aural rather than a visual perception. “Reading in the third millennium BC may therefore have been a matter of *hearing* the cuneiform, that is, hallucinating the speech from looking at its picture-symbols, rather than visual reading of syllables in our sense.”[19]

This “aural hallucination” may have been true also in the days of Augustine, when the words on the page did not just “become” sounds as soon as the eye perceived them; they *were* sounds. The child who sang the revelatory song in the garden next door to Augustine’s, just like Augustine before him, had no doubt learned that ideas, descriptions, true and fabricated stories, anything the mind could process, possessed a physical reality in sounds, and it was only logical that these sounds, represented on the tablet or scroll or manuscript page, be uttered by the tongue when recognized by the eye. Reading was a form of thinking and of speaking. Cicero, offering consolation to the deaf in one of his moral essays, wrote, “If they happen to enjoy recitations, they should first remember that before poems were invented, many wise men lived happily; and second, that much greater pleasure can be had in reading these poems than in hearing them.”[20] But this is only a booby-prize tendered by a philosopher who can himself delight in the sound of the written word. For Augustine, as for Cicero, reading was an oral skill: oratory in the case of Cicero, preaching in the case of Augustine.

Until well into the Middle Ages, writers assumed that their readers would hear rather than simply see the text, much as they themselves spoke their words out loud as they composed them. Since comparatively few people could read, public readings were common, and medieval texts repeatedly call upon the audience to “lend ears” to a tale. It may be that an ancestral echo of those reading practices persists in some of our idioms, as when we say, “I’ve heard from So-and-so” (meaning “I’ve received a letter”), or “So-and-so says” (meaning “So-and-so wrote”), or “This text doesn’t sound right” (meaning “It isn’t well written”).

Because books were mainly read out loud, the letters that

composed them did not need to be separated into phonetic unities, but were strung together in continuous sentences. The direction in which the eyes were supposed to follow these reels of letters varied from place to place and from age to age; the way we read a text today in the Western world — from left to right and from top to bottom — is by no means universal. Some scripts were read from right to left (Hebrew and Arabic), others in columns, from top to bottom (Chinese and Japanese); a few were read in pairs of vertical columns (Mayan); some had alternate lines read in opposite directions, back and forth — a method called *boustrophedon*, "as an ox turns to plough", in ancient Greek. Yet others meandered across the page like a game of Snakes and Ladders, the direction being signalled by lines or dots (Aztec).[21]

In the fifth century BC, a reader would have read out loud, unrolling her scroll with one hand while rolling it up with the other, exposing section after section.

The ancient writing on scrolls — which neither separated words nor made a distinction between lower-case and upper-case letters, nor used punctuation — served the purposes of someone accustomed to reading aloud, someone who would allow the ear to disentangle what to the eye seemed a continuous string of

signs. So important was this continuity that the Athenians supposedly raised a statue to a certain Phillatius, who had invented a glue for fastening together leaves of parchment or papyrus.[22] Yet even the continuous scroll, while making the reader's task easier, would not have helped a great deal in disentangling the clusters of sense. Punctuation, traditionally ascribed to Aristophanes of Byzantium (*circa* 200 BC) and developed by other scholars of the Library of Alexandria, was at best erratic. Augustine, like Cicero before him, would have had to practise a text before reading it out loud, since sight-reading was in his day an unusual skill and often led to errors of interpretation. The fourth-century grammarian Servius criticized his colleague Donat for reading, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the words *collectam ex Ilio pubem* ("a people gathered from Troy") instead of *collectam exilio pubem* ("a people gathered for exile").[23] Such mistakes were common when reading a continuous text.

Paul's *Epistles* as read by Augustine were not a scroll but a codex, a bound papyrus manuscript in continuous writing, in the new uncial or semi-uncial hand which had appeared in Roman documents in the last years of the third century. The codex was a pagan invention; according to Suetonius,[24] Julius Caesar was the first to fold a roll into pages, for dispatches to his troops. The early Christians adopted the codex because they found it highly practical for carrying around, hidden away in their clothes, texts that were forbidden by the Roman authorities. The pages could be numbered, which allowed the reader easier access to the sections, and separate texts, such as Paul's *Epistles*, could easily be bound in one convenient package.[25]

The separation of letters into words and sentences developed very gradually. Most early scripts - Egyptian hieroglyphs, Sumerian cuneiform, Sanskrit — had no use for such divisions. The ancient scribes were so familiar with the conventions of their craft that they apparently needed hardly any visual aids, and the early Christian monks often knew by heart the texts they were transcribing.[26] In order to help those whose reading skills were poor, the monks in the scriptorium made use of a writing method known as *per cola et commata*, in which the text was divided into